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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to describe the use of study centers and study center networks as a support system in distance education in Australia. Information was obtained by interviewing students, tutors, and coordinators of study centers within four distance-education systems. The University of Queensland, the Riverina College of Advanced Education, the Victorian TAFE Off Campus Network, and Deakin University were the four participating institutions. Differences among supervision of study centers were considerable although there were marked similarities in patterns of student usage of the centers. Also noted was ambivalence toward the place and meaning of the centers in the minds of the staff and administrators. A number of deficiencies in study centers were identified. From these descriptions, a model of study centers was developed with discussion on a variety of ways to put such a model into effect. Further research is being done by the institutions to determine the feasibility of providing more comprehensive services to students through networking of the study centers. (Author/KC)

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THE USE OF STUDY CENTRES

IN

FOUR DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

J.E. Gough.
Deakin University.
Geelong.
31st October, 1980.

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ABSTRACT

This report is concerned with the use of study centres and study centre networks as a support system in distance education. Information has been obtained by interviewing students, tutors, and co-ordinators of study centres within four distance education systems. Initially it was intended to follow up the interviews with a printed questionnaire to a larger sample of students. This was not done because the quality and consistency of the evidence from interviews was deemed adequate.

The University of Queensland, the Riverina College of Advanced Education, the Victorian TAFE Off Campus Network and Deakin University were the four participating institutions. Differences between study centres were considerable although there were marked similarities in patterns of student usage. A number of deficiencies in study centres were identified.

From these discussions a model of study centres was developed with discussion of a variety of ways in which such a model could be put into effect. Finally the report discusses the possibility of more extensive networks of study centres.

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In addition there were many students who gave time and effort to respond to questions about study centres and without whose responses we could not have proceeded.

Consultant

Because of the relative paucity of research in this area, and acknowledging the extensive work of the Open University in developing a regional network of study centres, Dr. David Sewart, Assistant Director of Regional Tutorial Services at the Open University served as consultant to the project. As the consultant, Dr. Sewart spent a month in Australia. He visited Toowoomba, Wangaratta, Melbourne and Geelong. Dr. Sewart read much of the draft material and, in particular, contributed extensively to the chapter reviewing the developments both in the Open University and elsewhere in the northern hemisphere.

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INTRODUCTION

Distance education is a growth industry, particularly at the tertiary level. New institutions are being created whose sole business is distance education; institutions that previously took no interest in it are entering the field. Established providers of distance education are trying to increase their share of the market. This burgeoning interest is reflected also in the upgraded quality of educational materials: there have been improvements in editing, graphics and instructional design. Materials in print are being supplemented and complemented by audio and video programs. Telephone tutorials are being used more often. Counselling and advising methods are being extended and refined. Regional networks of study centres are being established.

Much of this development has occurred within the last decade but distance education actually has antecedents stretching far back into history. It could be said that it has its origins with writing itself; the didactic intent of the historians Herodotus and Thucydides is just as apparent in Greece in the fifth century B.C. as it is in the epistles of St. Paul written over 500 years later.

However, only in the 20th century has distance teaching achieved international recognition. Some have seen it as an industrialised form of teaching arising out of new techniques perfected in this century (Peters, 1973). Others, while not denying the importance of new technologies, have seen in distance teaching a remedy for the rapidly escalating costs of labour intensive conventional teaching, in other words, a less expensive alternative. Indeed, cost effectiveness has increasingly become a major factor in this debate.

The possibility of supplementing or even replacing conventional teaching by distance teaching has had wide appeal. For developing countries without enough competent teachers, excellent materials for wide dissemination can be produced by a relatively small but highly skilled work force. In this way, it is theoretically possible to bypass the need for training a generation of teachers, thus significantly reducing the time required for a mass education program. For developed countries, however, the motives are more complex. Here education often helps fill leisure time. This new aspect of education, as well as the more traditional need, can be met relatively inexpensively by distance teaching. Moreover, even in developed countries the rapid expansion of knowledge in areas such as computing and electronics can outstrip the supply of trained teachers; distance education allows the existing experienced teachers to service more students.

The basis of distance education has always been the printed word. In the 20th century, however, new technologies have been used, in some instances quite extensively. Both radio and television open-circuit broadcasts have been supplemented by audio and video replay devices. These reduce time and place restrictions and have often proved useful adjuncts to the printed word. The telephone has added the possibility of immediate

interaction that had been lacking in distance teaching. In some instances the telephone has been developed extensively as a teaching medium (Turok, 1977), but its cost and limited development to date have stood in the way of more extensive use.

The Open University in the United Kingdom has been experimenting with other technological developments. Viewdata, is a system in which a television screen is linked to a telephone, which relays 'pages' of data stored in a computer. Access to the material is obtained through a small keyboard. The British post office already offers this facility (Prestel) to certain homes; it may be available nationally within the next two years. The Open University is developing its own system, Optel, which offers more sophisticated options.

In 'Cyclops', signals from an audio cassette are transferred to a visual format on a standard television monitor through an aerial input socket. The addition of a telephone link and a light pen for 'drawing on the television screen' can make possible student involvement. Through these and other systems the 'technologies' of distance education can now embrace all elements of conventional teaching.

Referring to the Open University system, Sewart (1975) notes that the conventional tutorial has been replaced by the use of television, radio and written correspondence; directed reading has been replaced by specially-designed course units; and the study centre has become a base for student interaction.

There is one other significant, and more important change, in distance education: the increasing emphasis on the student *learning*, rather than the institution *teaching*, at a distance. Because of this, individual support services have become an integral part of an effective distance education system. Clennell, Peters and Sewart refer to this in their description of the Open University system:

> By linking each under-graduate student at foundation level to a tutor-counsellor and by continuing this association beyond foundation level wherever possible, the Open University has sought to meet a discerned need. It seeks to provide a continuous educational support which cuts across disciplines and across faculties. The frequent contact, whether by face-to-face or other methods, the subject link which is reinforced through the correspondence elements and the provision of sympathetic help in planning a beneficial work pattern, all these generate a sound basis of mutual understanding between students and tutor-counsellors at foundation level which students may rely on through their later studies. It is this relationship which breaks down the isolation of the home based student and begins to encourage and shape the effective dialogue which is the basis of education. There has always been a perspective which regards education as personal development rather than helping people to memorise information. The continuity of contact and concern which is the basis of the relationship between a tutor-counsellor and a student facilitates this personal development.
>
> (Clennell, Peters and Sewart, 1977)

This individual approach must be viewed in the context of similar approaches that have been adopted in conventional teaching, particularly at the primary and secondary level, since World War II. In distance education such services have had to be adapted to the student population. A variety of systems has therefore arisen, depending on the geographical distribution of students, their level of study, length of study time and other factors.

In the last decade there has been a confusion between 'open learning' — referring to openness of access — and 'distance learning' — referring to freedom from the constraints of space and time. This confusion has particularly arisen from the Open University, where distance education at a university standard is offered to students who do not possess conventional university entry requirements. Distance education has opened new vistas to the adult learner and provided a 'second chance' for a large percentage of the

population. The conceptual aims of the British system were reflected across the Atlantic in the Carnegie Commission on High Education, which stated:

> Society would gain if work and study were mixed throughout a lifetime, thus reducing the sense of sharply compartmentalised roles of isolated students versus workers and of youth versus isolated age.
>
> (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1971).

Having stated all of this it is clear that distance education presents a paradox. On the one hand, efforts are being made to construct for the learner an educational experience that will be intellectually complete and academically respectable; theoretically it may be enjoyed without attending the campus, (all courses may not achieve such an aim, however, and some distance education systems do have attendance requirements). On the other hand there are increasing efforts to improve communication and interaction between the distance student and his teacher, and between the students themselves. Indeed, there have been efforts to make provision for attendance at centres other than the main campus. Amongst the more obvious efforts to achieve these aims are the networks of study centres being set up by distance education institutions.

This study examines some such networks to see what they offer, how students use them, and to what extent they contribute to an effective distance education system.

A REVIEW OF THE STUDY CENTRE NETWORK AND OTHER SUPPORT SYSTEMS

This review describes support services used in distance education in various parts of the world. One of the more visible of such systems is the study centre network. Perhaps it is the British Open University that has developed this network to its fullest extent, although other institutions, such as the University of Queensland, had established study centres long before the Open University even existed.

The first section of this review describes the study centres as a support service developed in the Open University. It also describes subsequent adaptations established by other distance education systems throughout the world. The second section looks at other support services, including the British tutor-counsellor system, the American mentor system, contract learning, self-help or study groups, and the use of technology.

Some comments about definition are appropriate at this point.

The study commenced without any attempt to formulate a definition of the term 'study centre'. If an institution used the term 'study centre', it was accepted as such for the purpose of this study. An exception is the Albury campus of the Riverina College of Advanced Education. It began as a study centre but later was designated a secondary campus rather than a study centre.

It may now be useful to offer a tentative definition that emerged as the study proceeded. It is an interim definition:

A study centre is a physical facility provided by an institution

- normally at a location remote from the main campus, often using the facilities of another institution or organisation, and
- providing students of the remote institution access to facilities and services needed for their courses, but

without the academic or administrative responsibility for those students passing fully either to the study centre or to the institution 'hosting' the centre.

These seem to be the essential elements of a study centre — it is a physical entity, it may or may not be attached to a local institution, it provides facilities and services, and it does not have administrative or academic responsibility for the students. The question of definition will be taken up later in the discussion.

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDY CENTRE NETWORK

In January 1971 the Open University started a teaching program designed to provide a unique, university-standard education. Clennell, Peters and Sewart wrote about the difference between the Open University and the traditional university:

> The University was open in the sense that its courses were available to students irrespective of their occupation or previous educational background. It was not residential and its students would be working for their degrees in their spare time from their own homes wherever they lived in the United Kingdom. In addition, the university was open normally only to adult students over the age of twenty-one.
>
> (Clennell, Peters and Sewart, 1977: 1).

The same authors described other problems faced by many of the Open University students: work pressures, domestic demands, and the more technical study problems of work scheduling, concentration and memory. Because of those problems, they noted the need to provide effective support services for students; however, they also noted that high motivation should be considered in the selection of students.

The Open University established a regional network of study centres as one form of support service. Some 260 of these centres, usually in other educational institutions and open only in the evenings, were established throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They were located in areas of high population, or where transport links were good. Every student was attached to one of these study centres and to one of the 13 regions of the Open University's decentralised system.

Each of the 13 regions has its own regional director who is responsible for providing local services to support independent learning. These services include:

- Maintaining contact with local organisations (education authorities, public libraries, employers) to ensure maximum benefit from facilities in that area.
- Running the local study centres and appointing local tutor-counsellors and course tutors.
- Liaising with central staff in the organisation of summer schools.

The Open University student works mainly at home. Attendance at the study centres is voluntary.

These study centres are one part of a complex student support service, which includes tutor-counsellors and tutors. As Clennell, Peters and Sewart write, the study centres

> offer students a range of facilities which can supplement some of those available at home, but above all, they enable students to meet each other and to learn from each other in discussion groups. The study centre is also the focal point for the undergraduate students' meetings with tutor-counsellors.
>
> These meetings are an important element of the program at foundation level where numbers normally allow provision for local contact.
>
> (Clennell, Peters and Sewart, 1977: 5).

The main purpose of this contact is to help students both academically and personally. Correspondence units and broadcasts provide the student with both information and guidance in a standard package. It is through the tutorial and counselling system, however, that this standard package is interpreted according to the students' individual needs.

These writers go on to say,

> When they begin their studies, undergraduate students are assigned to a tutor-counsellor at their local study centre. The tutor-counsellor will normally be responsible for all teaching and counselling in the foundation year, although in some instances (the science foundation course, for example) specialists may be brought in.
>
> The tutor-counsellor is available at the study centre on a fairly regular basis and may discuss strictly academic matters; he or she might also deal with study skills on a much wider basis as well as reviewing and assisting with the student's overall progress. As either a supplement or substitute (in cases where students do not attend study centres) contact between the tutor-counsellor and students is maintained by other means, including correspondence and telephone. In addition, the tutor-counsellor is responsible for assessing the material sent in by individual students. When the undergraduate student advances to post foundation level courses, the correspondence then is provided by a specialist course tutor who might also meet students for tutorials or contact them in other ways.
>
> The tutor-counsellor then provides stability and continuity in the life of the Open University student; he or she acts as a 'general educational advisor' at a local level, throughout the student's educational career.
>
> (Clennell, Peter and Sewart, 1977: 6).

The report of the planning committee on the Open University (1969) recognised the 'great advantage' that could result from face-to-face meetings. The development of the counselling service was of particular importance to the planning committee. Part-time, face-to-face teaching and group discussions were to be components of a 'fully integrated teaching system', and the establishment of 'study' or 'viewing' centres was seen as a matter of urgency. It is worth noting that the report, while affirming the principle of home-based study, did not describe face-to-face meetings as optional or peripheral. Indeed, along with 'summer schools', they were seen as highly desirable.

The term 'study centre' dates from 1971, when the Open University was contemplating its first intake of students. Then only four foundation level courses were available; some 25,000 students were admitted to these courses. The establishment of such centres was considered essential. They were equipped to receive BBC television and VHF radio. Face-to-face meetings were encouraged at the study/viewing centres as part of the complete system.

The term 'study centre' soon replaced the original term 'viewing centre'. The words invite interpretation which might now, as the regional system has developed, appear somewhat misleading. The word 'centre' could imply a single place where local services to the student are concentrated, and where all local students focus their energies while they learn within the system. Moreover, the term 'study' might imply provision for private study away from the pressures of the home (this was certainly seen as a possibility at the beginning). In addition, the word 'study' might imply the co-operative study of groups under the guidance of tutors. It was hoped that the student attached to a given study centre might also begin to identify with it and achieve some form of corporate identity, so that a sense of community amongst the students might emerge. This sense of community then would find expression in social as well as academic activities.

That was the theory. We find the practice different in 1980. Students focus on the local centre only at foundation level and in the preceding advisory and induction phases. Although all students following post-foundation courses are assigned a tutor-counsellor, the majority do not come to the centre to see the tutor. Rather, they use the telephone or mails for contact. Very little viewing or listening takes place in the study centre; much of the open circuit broadcasting takes place when the study centre is closed. Likewise, little use is reported of replay facilities. As a result, after only two years, the Open

University had stopped providing Technicolour cassettes in study centres. Since 1978 it has sent audio cassettes directly to the students' homes through a postal library system.

After foundation level, tutorials take place only in larger and often distant towns (especially true of laboratory sessions where special equipment is needed), since the average course population at that stage is less than 500, that is, an average of less than two students at each local study centre. Further, larger study centres used as central venues cannot cope either with the increased demand of the special requirements of some courses or the number of tutorials held on Saturdays. Additional premises have to be used On the positive side, computer terminals (which exist in most study centres and are linked to three main computers) are used extensively by students, especially those studying mathematics, science and technology. Furthermore, installation of a variety of additional resources, such as Viewdata and Cyclops, is being planned for local study centres; these will necessitate student attendance at the study centre.

Thus, the original notion of a corporate life for the study centre is not a reality in most cases. Though real and valuable when it occurs, it seems to depend not only on the congeniality of the centre but also on the disposition and character of a few energetic students.

Costs, however, have not changed. In the Open University it was originally expected that the cost of the study centres would be three pounds per student. In reality the total cost in 1971, when there were 25,000 students, was 55,000 pounds. In 1980, with over 70,000 students, the cost has increased to 200,000 pounds. It seems remarkable that this figure still remains within the original estimate despite considerable inflation over the decade. However, Open University study centres normally are in educational institutions. Since the centres are open only on weekday evenings, the additional cost to the host institution is marginal.

A number of papers have been written on the success of the Open University study centre system. Bradford, (1979), for instance, writes that attendance at admissions advisory services, induction meetings, and counselling sessions, conditional registration meetings and social events, as well as the organisation of self help groups and the vitality of student associations and committees, are all factors in the success of a study centre. Other factors may be relevant, such as accessibility, average distance from home, adequacy of public transport, comfort and amosphere, type of buildings, room furnishings, coffee facilities, proximity of rooms, opening hours and the attitude of caretaking staff. However, he classifies these factors as 'details' and identifies the two principal reasons for the success of a home study centre as the role of the tutor-counsellor and the type of institution in which the centre is housed.

Kirk (1978) supports Bradford's emphasis on the importance of personal contact as a vital component in the success of the study centre. The personal contacts between student and tutor-counseller are also seen as important factors by Mills (1978).

The role of the study centre has changed greatly from the original concept. Leaving aside its special function as a location for a computer terminal, it would appear that the study centre in the Open University can be described as the place in which the tutor-counsellor frequently operates. Tutorials (other than at foundation level), self-help groups and student corporate life are not by any means common to all study centres. The tutor-counsellor, however, is the 'face' of the Open University to its students and the focal point of its student support services. The tutor-counsellor, therefore, is probably of prime importance in the success rate of students. The success of a study centre is, to a great extent, dependent on the tutor-counsellors there. In the final analysis the study centre is merely a convenient base for their work. Indeed, tutor-counsellors operate effectively in certain areas without such a base; this has always been the case in the north of Scotland and the Western Isles.

If this analysis is correct, then the tutor-counsellor is the vital element in the student support service in the Open University. Study centres are peripheral. Contrary to the orig-

inal intentions of the planning committee, study centres may be superfluous elements in the Open University. Removing study centres from the range of support services, probably would not have drastic repercussions in the overall system.

VARIATIONS ON THE OPEN UNIVERSITY THEME

Fletcher (1975) comments that the Open University of Great Britain has provided greater impetus toward developing options for higher learning than any other educational movement in the last 100 years. West Germany, Japan and South Africa have been influenced by the British model. However Fletcher states that the impact of the Open University has been felt most fully in the United States of America.

That impact can best be seen in the external degree programs of Empire State College (ESC) and Syracuse University, both in New York state.

Empire State College's administrative headquarters are in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. Instead of a central campus, however, it operates through a statewide network of 29 'learning facilities' (Gross, 1976). Some are complete 'learning centres', staffed with a number of full-time faculty members and administrators. Others, called 'units', are more modest often directed by a single co-ordinator and several faculty 'mentors'. These learning centres are more akin to the Open University regional offices than to its study centres.

The major learning centres are in Albany, New York City, Long Island (suburban New York City), Rochester, Suffern and Buffalo. Each has a dean, administrative support staff, and a faculty of 13 to 15 full-time 'mentors' who assist up to 500 students in developing individualised programs of study. A mentor usually supervises about 25 to 30 students, seeing each one twice a month, sometimes once a week.

Keller and Meskill (1973), describe the future plans of Empire State to establish 'satellite' centres that would provide learning centres within commuting distance for most citizens of New York. Each would be administered by the dean of the regional centre. The 'satellite' centres would be responsive to changing needs and conditions locally; they could be expanded or discontinued as necessary.

An example of one such satellite centre, established in Manhattan's Regional Learning Centre, is called the Centre for Labour Studies. The Regional Learning Centre has a small core faculty of mentors and a supply of teaching and study materials. Each satellite would be staffed by at least one full-time mentor or counsellor, and a complement of part-time faculty and tutors. This would be enough to serve the specialised needs of the local students.

Gross (1976) reports that the ESC centres also probed their communities to work out co-operative arrangements with business and social agencies. However, no evaluation reports have been published yet.

The study centre as a support system in distance education has been used in other parts of the world, including Europe, Asia and the southern hemisphere. In most cases the British Open University model has been used, either directly or indirectly, in an adapted form. The Fernuniversität in Hagen set up a system similar to that of the British model, with some 15 study centres. No evaluative reports have been published yet, however. The Fernuniversität also has 'mentoren', but they do not have special responsibilities for specific students as do tutor-counsellors in the Open University.

The Allama Iqbal Open University of Pakistan has eight regional study centres controlling a network of smaller local centres. This university also has a tutor-counselling system based on the British model.

In the southern hemisphere, both Australia and New Zealand use the study centre as a support system in distance education. In Australia, Deakin University, the University of Queensland, and other tertiary institutions use different types of study centre systems to

suit the particular needs of each individual system. Whilst these may have some similarity to the study centre system of the Open University they have developed independently and owe little to the British system.

Massey University in New Zealand uses a system of local and area student convenors, acting as representatives of the External Students' Society, in centres throughout the country. In addition to promoting local study groups, conducting book exchanges and study skill seminars, and organizing activities related to extra-mural study, the convenors serve as a local source of information about study and facilitate communication between students and their management committee based at Palmerston North.

Since the present report suggests that it is the O.U. tutor-counselling system, rather than the study centres, that is the key to its successful support system, it might be useful now to examine the American mentor and the British tutor-counsellor system. Likewise, it might be helpful to describe contract learning and other variations of student support systems used in distance education. In view of recent observations on the uses of study centres in the British Open University some interesting questions may be posed. For example, is the study centre nothing more than a four-walled 'shell' that houses the real 'egg' — namely, the personal interaction offered by a tutor-counselling or mentor system? If it is, will the use of the study centre as a student support system lose significance and make way for alternative and more efficient means of support for students? In short, is the study centre as a support system becoming obsolete? These and other questions will be returned to in the discussion later in this report.

OTHER METHODS OF PROVIDING SUPPORT SERVICES

Until recently the hypothesis that face-to-face teaching and the presence of student peer groups could not be adequately replaced in distance teaching received almost universal acceptance. In the last decade and particularly in the last two or three years, however, that hypothesis has been challenged by the success of the Open University and other distance education systems.

The educational press confidently predicted a 90 per cent drop-out rate when the Open University first began. Instead, up to 60 per cent of the students are graduating. In most Australian tertiary institutions with well developed distance education systems, students at a distance perform as well as or better than their on campus counterparts.

At the Open University it was found that a very significant proportion of the 40 per cent 'drop-out' rate is unavoidable. Students leave their studies for various reasons, including the obvious cases of death, significant changes in domestic circumstances, or the satisfaction with completion of one part, rather than the whole, of a degree program.

The popular conception of the Open University is that of a system dominated by a highly structured package of correspondence texts and broadcasts. The package and its production are widely copied. However, the success of the British Open University does not rest entirely on this highly structured teaching package, but rather on the interaction of the student with that package, an interaction supported by the counsellors and tutors in the regions. The success of the British system is based on the combination of these elements.

The British Tutor-Counselling System

Open University support services are offered through tutor-counsellors in some 260 local study centres throughout the United Kingdom. In addition, students are assigned to specialist tutors who deal with the academic content of the course and mark assignments. The function of the tutors is exclusively related to the teaching package.

Clennell, Peters and Sewart (1977) identify counselling in the Open University as distinctive. Its origins are embedded in the Report of the Planning Committee (1969):

> Because of the range of choices inherent in the degree pattern, 'the openness' of the university, and the possibility that many students may wish to enrol who are not at a stage when they could profitably pursue degree studies, we consider the development of the counselling service to be of particular importance. It will be the means by which the univeristy can reduce to a minimum the number of students who embark upon courses only to find that they cannot continue with them.
>
> (Report of the Planning Committee, 1969: 51).

Over the years, the initial counselling model has undergone certain changes. However, its function in the Open University remains vital to the success of the students.

The underlying concept of the British tutor-counselling system is 'continuity of concern'. By linking each undergraduate student to a tutor-counsellor at foundation level and continuing this association beyond that level, the Open University provides continuous support which cuts across disciplines and faculties. Clennell, Peters and Sewart (1977) describe the relationship between the student and the tutor-counsellor as one which breaks down the isolation of the home-based student and develops the effective dialogue that is the basis of education. They note that this same relationship is effective in achieving the broader educational aim of personal development.

The tutor-counsellor, therefore, emerges as the 'face' of the university. He or she becomes the bridge between the student and the institution. The tutor-counsellor is a mediator between course, tutor and student, ensuring that students understand the role of tutors and the support services available within the Open University.

The tutor-counselling service is staffed by part-time, specially trained educational counsellors.

The student-to-counsellor ratio is approximately 30 to 1. The main task of the tutor-counsellor is to provide students with information and advice on a range of educational matters. When necessary, they refer students to expert advisory services. Tutor-counsellors also provide individuals with an opportunity to discuss their progress and future personal development. Tutor-counsellors might, however, offer specific advice in certain areas, including information on credit exemptions, summer school, registration, withdrawal procedures, examinations and honours degree requirements. They might also advise students on assignments, obtaining materials, appeals and other matters.

Clennell, Peters and Sewart (1977) note that many of the best ways tutor-counsellors get to know their students well are informal. Although the study centre might be a convenient meeting place for the student and tutor-counsellor, it would appear that the use of the telephone and informal meeting places such as private homes and even the local pub, for instance, are more frequently used for this purpose.

The British Open University now employs some 2,000 tutor-counsellors. They are responsible for approximately 70,000 students. That the Open University allotted approximately one quarter of its 1978 budget to this student support system reveals the importance of this service to the university.

The Mentor and Contract Learning

In the United States the success of the Open University stimulated an interest in the type of support services used by the British. Whilst not necessarily stemming from the tutor-counselling system, the 'mentor' system and contract learning, illustrate a similar concern to develop appropriate support for students.

Empire State College was founded in 1971 and emerged rapidly as one of the 14 liberal arts colleges in the State University of New York system. Its mandate was to develop alternative approaches to higher education for those who could not or would not attend

formal classes on a traditional campus. Therefore, the student population consists of working adults with a full range of professional and personal responsibilities. Their profiles are similar to the average Open University student.

In the ESC academic program, the student's own objectives — personal, professional and intellectual — are assessed together by mentor and student, and a personal program is drawn up. The system then operates on this individual learning contract between student and mentor. Hence, the term 'contract' learning.

The mentors function in a variety of roles. Bradley describes their functions in this way:

> Like other faculties, mentors are trained in and represent the various disciplines, but they must work often beyond the boundaries of their disciplines and apply their intellectual skills more broadly.
>
> (Bradley, 1978).

Assigned to 25 to 30 students, the mentor initially helps each student develop an individual study program based on past educational and occupational experiences, interests and aspirations, and major activities spelled out in the learning contracts (Stern, 1975). The mentor is then involved in all aspects of the student's progress, including degree program planning and tutorial instruction. Consultation on a weekly or biweekly basis continues throughout the course of a student's enrolment.

The role of the mentor appears to be a very personal one. In making judgments against a general academic framework, the mentor may take into account other factors such as psychological, intellectual, moral or ethical development (Coughlan, 1979).

This aspect of the mentor system sets it apart from the British tutor-counselling. No reports on the Empire State drop-out rate are available.

Contract Learning and the University Without Walls

Rather than being confronted with a set of course requirements to be 'fulfilled', the concept of contract learning as described in a Ford Foundation report on open learning (Gross, 1976) places the student at the centre of the educational process. The mentoring or counselling in this method of distance education suggests the need for a highly organised system of support.

The idea for the University Without Walls grew out of the experiences of the union for Experimenting Colleges and Univerities in the 1960's (Baskin and Hallenbeck, 1972). In late 1969, planning for the University Without Walls (UWW) began with grants from the Ford Foundation and other sources.

A task force of faculty, students and administrators at each institution involved in UWW helped develop the program. It was decided that each University With Walls Institution should function as an autonomous unit, while the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities central office in Yellow Springs, Ohio, would serve as the clearing house and co-ordinating body. Each UWW college had to share its own program. Thus each institution dealt with its own students, building its own strategy for a new program.

After admission to a University Without Walls institution, students embark on an orientation process designed to prepare them for their UWW programs. Of prime importance in the process is a teacher-advisor (the mentor or tutor-counsellor counterpart) who helps the student define learning objectives as well as the development and evaluation of his or her program. This advisor may be a faculty member, an adjunct faculty member or some other person.

Working from an Inventory of Learning Resources, the student and advisor design a program amd draw up a learning contract. This initial 'contract' serves as a basis for evaluation of the student's subsequent accomplishments.

Learning activities may include regular classes (at the student's own or another institution), internships, jobs and field experiences, independent study, individual or group

projects, and the use of programmed learning materials, including cassette tapes. There are no fixed time schedules. The student may plan his or her experience around a time period that best suits the learning plan.

Each student keeps a cumulative record of his or her learning plans, objectives and activities. The student also keeps an evaluation of these experiences. Criteria and time required for the award of the degree are determined by the student and his advisor. Final evaluation of the student's work is carried out by a committee of faculty, students and other persons with whom the student has been working.

The factor of cost effectiveness in higher education has been influential in directing world wide interest to distance education. One of the major objectives of the planners of UWW is that the program, while maintaining (if not improving), the quality of education, should be economical and self-supporting through tuition fees alone.

Self-help Study Groups

The concept of self-help or study groups as an additional source of support in distance education is also a feature in the Open University system.

Clennell, Peters and Sewart (1977), describe this educational process as dialogue. It is dialogue not in the sense of interchange between teacher and student, but in the sense of Socratic dialogue, or the pursuit of knowledge by two or more students who advance towards a goal by mutual stimulus. They emphasise that if a study group is to be successful, it demands an understanding of this concept and a commitment to it on the part of the students.

In some of the Open University regions tutor-counsellors helped initiate and co-ordinate study groups in a number of post-foundation courses. Students were asked if their names and addresses could be released to other students for 'educational' purposes. Study groups were then formed, the role of the tutor-counsellor in relation to these groups being that of a catalyst rather than a teacher. Unlike foundation course groups, which work together with tutor-counsellors most of the time, post-foundation study groups consist solely of students working in a group. A tutor-counsellor or course tutor is only infrequently, if ever, present.

Clennell, Peters and Sewart comment that a successful study group must plan both method to be used and content to be studied. (They note that the foundation year experience that the British Open University student has with tutor-counsellors should contribute toward the success of a study group). Tutor-counsellors may help choose the methods most appropriate for their groups. They identify the following criterion as critical for the success of a study group.

> Its members should have enough confidence in each other to be able to acknowledge freely their own ignorance and uncertainty.
>
> (Clennell, Peters and Sewart, 1977: 37).

They report, as well, that much use is made of the telephone by student groups, not only to consult the course tutor and tutor-counsellor, but also to plan and prepare face-to-face sessions. Sewart (1975) invesigated the value of self-help groups as a support in the British Open University, and described the following pilot scheme carried out in the Cheshire area in 1973. A total of 57 groups initially met in late January and early February 1973. By the end of September some 37 groups were still active, having 'lasted' throughout the Open University academic year. Almost all the study groups met in the study centre. Of the 37 groups who met for the whole year, only two met each week; 15 met once a fortnight and 20 met less regularly. Of these 20, most met once every three weeks. The total average attendance of each group throughout the year was 180 out of a grand total of approximately 580. Thus approximately 30 per cent of the students attended regularly throughout the year. From these figures and other observations, Sewart therefore concluded that self-help groups as a support service could be regarded as significantly useful in a distance education system.

Self-help groups have been encouraged in other distance education programs. No evaluative information is currently available for comparison with the British reports, although Massey University in New Zealand has for many years encouraged a system of study groups. The University has developed it to the extent of using an Extra-mural Students' Society to provide a number of student convenors, who are responsible for organising and running a network of study groups throughout New Zealand.

The Use of Technology as a Support in Distance Education

Gross (1976) makes the observation that the most direct way to broaden access to higher education is simply to make the best possible instruction available to the widest possible portion of the public. The Open University made use of television and radio to relay teaching to as many people as possible. Across the Atlantic and in Europe, there has been considerable experimentation in the use of media in distance education.

In the United States, the University of Mid-America attempted the widespread broadcasting of courses. In 1971 the University of Nebraska developed the first plan for a television-based open university in the midwest.

The University of Quebec (UQ) created the Tele-Universite in 1972 as a service organisation, and has a counsellor figure within the system similar to the American mentor and the British tutor-counsellor. These moniteurs-animateurs are not academic specialists but persons with backgrounds similar to those of the students. One third are, in fact, enrolled students themselves, and few of the remainder hold any special qualifications beyond a first degree.

In Sweden, the committee for Television and Radio in Education (TRU-I) launched a university program pilot project between 1967 and 1972. However, unlike the British use of the media, which was totally independent and endorsed by the government, the TRU project encountered problems which caused Vanderhayden and Brunel (1977) to conclude that there can be no efficient multimedia educational service without an important degree of independence.

Teaching at a distance relies now and will continue to rely upon printing. Other technologies have supplemented this but none has replaced it. The telephone, for instance, has offered a direct substitute for student/tutor interaction. However, the telephone is limited, since tutors and students must have their interchange at the same time. It is further limited both by the requirement of an installation and by the cost of the link. Furthermore, telephone lectures or tutorials between one tutor and a number of students, while far less costly in tutor time, begin to pose some of the disadvantages of radio in that tutors are deprived of non-verbal signals. Tutors using the telephone tutorial tend to teach at their own pace and their students refrain from interrupting.

There are similar disadvantages to radio. The use of audio and video cassettes however, can ameliorate these problems by offering the student an opportunity to view and listen at his own pace. The availability of replay facilities is the only restriction but interaction between tutor and students is virtually non-existent within this medium.

Printed material, radio and television, then, can be used only for the simple transmission of subject matter. Assuming replay facilities, all can be used at the student's own pace. With the wide dissemination of equipment in recent years all are, or could be, independent of a fixed location. They are, however, the tools of teaching at a distance and do not permit interaction. Only the telephone offers this.

Despite the drawbacks, an Open University report in 1979 advocated technological innovation applied in various forms (Bradford, 1979). It was suggested that such innovations could be used to provide more effective and efficient teaching, learning and the optional use of scarce resources.

Conclusion

It is becoming increasingly obvious that successful distance education systems need a solid background of effective support systems to ensure success for their students. What, then, is the true nature of efficient support services?

Delling makes the following descriptive and definitive statements:

> 'What the learner really needs — also in distant study — is someone who can help him, who organises learning opportunities, who learns together with him, who explores and examines (Greek syzetein). In an organisation that develops distant study courses, many different people have different tasks. There exists, however, no job for a 'teacher' there.'

He proposes the use of the concepts 'distant study' and 'distant study course', and defines them as follows:

> 'A distant study course is an artificial dialogic learning opportunity in which the physical distance between the learner and the helping organisation is bridged by an artificial signal carrier. Distant study then, on the basis of a distant study course is an eight-dimensional system of learning processes and communications processes by means of artificial signal carriers. The dimensions are: the learner, the society, the helping organisation, the goal of learning, the contents to be learned, the result of learning, the distance and the signal carrier.
>
> The processes are learning processes in the learner, in the society, and in the helping organisation, and communication processes between the three.
>
> The function of the 'helping organisation' is to take over, upon the wish of the learner, everything he cannot (yet) do for himself, with the tendency that the learner eventually becomes autonomous. Finally, the only function left for the helping organisation is that of an information and documenation centre (as, for example, a good library).
>
> (Delling, 1976: 19-20).

Thus support services in distance education should be of a varied nature to provide the best possible learning situations for the individualised style of this method of study. Organisations offering education at a distance need to examine carefully and evaluate the effectiveness of selected support systems, whether they be study centre, the mentor/counsellor system, the use of media or contract learning. Students learning alone and at a distance lack the supportive atmosphere of the tutorial class. They have no one to measure themselves against. They do not know if they are doing well. Easy comparison with their peer group is not possible.

Any system of distance teaching must therefore concern itself not only with 'what' it is teaching and 'how' it is teaching it, but with the quality and effectiveness of its support services.

THE PROJECT

The preceding review indicates something of the range of support services being developed for students in distance education systems. Variations on the theme of a study centre network are not uncommon. What is relatively rare are studies that critically examine the nature, effectiveness and use of study centres. This study attempts to look at the study centres developed by four Australian tertiary institutions engaged in distance education. It is the first such study in the Australian context. It may be one of the few studies evaluating this kind of support facility.

Four institutions from three states were invited to participate in the study. These were the University of Queensland, Riverina College of Advanced Education, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and Deakin University. The selection provides a broad spectrum of both institutions and study centres. Universities, colleges of advanced education and TAFE institutions are included. The institutions range in size from very large to relatively small. They include distance education systems which are only a small part of the institution, as well as those that represent a significant and growing proportion of the institutions' activities. Amongst the study centres there are those that operate on premises owned by the institution, with a full-time academic and administrative staff while at the other end of the spectrum there are study centres that are simply services provided by another institution.

Aims and Objectives

It is not the purpose of this study to compare one study centre system against another. Essentially the task is to identify the factors that may be relevant to the effective operation of a study centre. The study attempts to:

- examine the aims and objectives for which study centres were set up
- determine how well and in what ways study centres are meeting these objectives;
- ascertain what use students make of study centres, including which students, under what circumstances, and for what purposes;
- find out how an institution decides to set up study centres and what factors influence decisions about the location of centres and the kind of centres to be established;
- look at the co-operative arrangements that are developed and to see how satisfactory these are to the various parties; and
- analyse any cost benefit data that may be available.

The study will also consider whether it is possible to identify criteria or guidelines that might be used when institutions are considering the establishment of study centres.

Finally the report will address itself to the possibility of establishing one or more networks of study centres on a wider basis than now exists.

Methods

The investigation has been designed in two stages, dictated substantially by the requirements to provide at least an interim report by June 30th, 1980.

The first stage of the investigation is largely descriptive. It entails gathering information about the three states to see if there are variables significant to study centre networks. Similarly, the participating institutions are described, including their philosophies and practices in respect to distance education. Finally, information is gathered about particular study centres and each is set within the context of its own community.

Information gathering proceeded largely on the basis of examining written documents and interviewing administrative and teaching staff and students. These interviews, both individual and group, were conducted using a structured interview schedule. A number of interviews were tape recorded. Questions were asked on the following topics in reference to study centres:

Location and convenience
Equipment, accommodation and facilities
Access
Staffing and staff functions
Library facilities
Functions and frequency of usage, including
. tutorials
. orientation meetings
. self help study groups
. information/assistance from staff
. social functions
. private study
. lecturer visits/seminars/workshops
. audio visual
. library
Management and organisational relationships
Financial arrangements

Interviews with students were conducted using a schedule of detailed questions. As interviews progressed, this instrument was refined. In the light of student responses, a mailed questionnaire has been developed for use in the second stage of the study.

Stage two of the study will consist of a mailed questionnaire survey to elicit opinions from representative samples of students about those aspects of study centres that seem important to them. This material will be analysed and used to test propositions generated in the first phase of the study.

Study Centres

The following study centres have been selected for the purpose of this study:

Queensland University
- Toowoomba
- Mackay
- Nambour (Sunshine Coast)
- Gladstone

Riverina College of Advanced Education
- Griffith
- Albury

Victorian Tape Off Campus Network
- RMIT
- Footscray Institute of Technology (TAFE division)
- Frankston Technical School
- Bendigo College of Advanced Education (TAFE division)
- Gordon Technical College (Geelong)
- Sunraysia Community College (Mildura)

Deakin University
- Mildura
- Bendigo
- Melbourne
- Wangaratta
- Albury

THE STUDY CENTRE NETWORKS

In all, seventeen study centres were visited across the four systems. Detailed accounts of each study centre are included in the full report, copies of which may be obtained from the Centre for Educational Services, Deakin University, Geelong. This report includes only a summary statement about each of the four study centre networks.

THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

Philosophy

According to J.R. Laverty (1974) Director of External Studies at the University of Queensland, the school's 13 study centres 'provide a focus for the educational activities of external students' and offer 'experiences they would otherwise have missed by not attending the teaching campus'. Associations with fellow students and tutors at the centre should provide psychological and academic support, especially important as preventative measures against feelings of isolation and remoteness. As Laverty writes, 'these psychological factors should not be underestimated, since experience has shown that they sometimes have a devastating effect on isolated students and generally affect all students in varying degrees'.

Administratively, the study centre makes decentralisation possible. Tasks that require personal contact, counselling on course planning and study problems, for instance, can be carried out at the centre. In short, the local centre can perform the routine administrative work that is done most effectively at the local or district level.

More importantly, a study centre also will be a local resource centre and a meeting place that, as Laverty (1974) says, 'facilitates the formation and operation of tutorial and study groups, simplifies the organisation of tours of duty or visits by the permanent teaching staff, and increase their effectiveness'.

Facilities

University of Queensland Study Centres typically house a small library collection and learning materials such as maps, films, transparencies, recordings, audio and video tapes. Audio visual equipment is also available.

The small reference libraries in the study centre (Ringrose Libraries) contain a relatively restricted number of key books. These local libraries have a close working relationship with the central external studies library, the Thatcher Library, which is reserved for the exclusive use of external students.

Staffing and Tutorials

In most study centres, staff are employed on a part-time basis. A part-time officer-in-charge is appointed for each centre. His or her responsibilities include acting as information officer, administering the centre, arranging and supervising tutorial groups and study groups, and in most cases acting as examination secretary for the local examination centre. If enough students are enrolled in the same subjects, the officer-in-charge encourages students to meet to discuss their course.

Tutorials may be arranged wherever there is a group of not less than four students enrolled in a subject. The University realises that it is difficult for external students to test their ability to think and write critically and constructively about their new knowledge without tutorial assistance. Laverty says that 'the purpose of tutorials is, then, to help students to attain high standards of critical thinking and self expression about the subject being studied'. (Country and Part-time, Tutors, 1978).

Types of Study Centres

Study centres vary from place to place (Laverty, 1974). In cities where a tertiary institution already exists, a study centre might be located on campus, where facilities are already available. In 1974 study centres of this type were located at James Cook University in Townsville, the Administrative College in Port Moresby and the Darwin Community College. At Rockhampton the university has leased part of the municipal library for a study centre. Despite its convenient location, centres of this kind are seen as substitutes for properly adapted facilities. In some cases the university has built its own study centres. From 1974, these publicly-funded centres were situated at Toowoomba and Mackay and more recently in Cairns. The university also has several study centres located in high schools. The location of study centres in the Queensland University network are shown in Figure One.

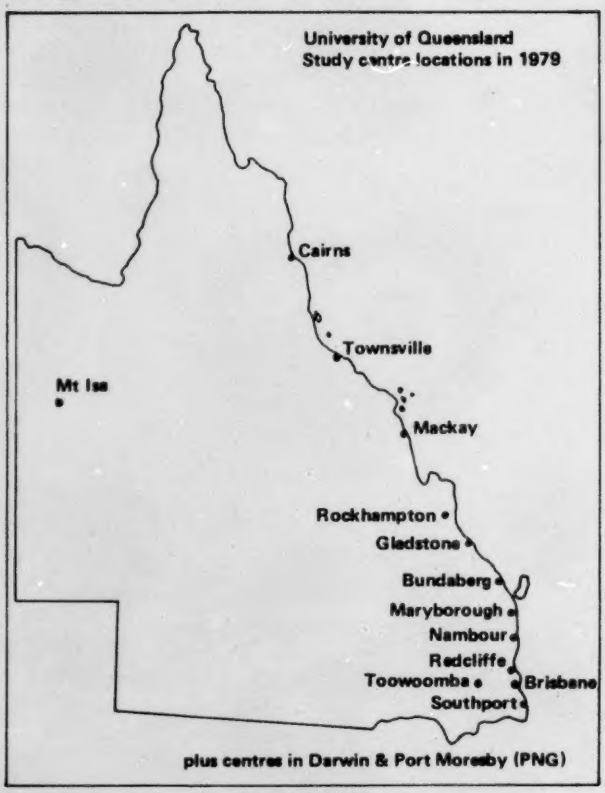

FIGURE ONE
Locations of Queensland University Study Centres

Use of Study Centres

In general Queensland students use study centres for library, where a Ringrose library is provided; for tutorials, where these are held; and for information, where the study centre seems able to provide it. Little use is made of audio visual equipment, while some private study occurs at only one of the centres.

Use of the Nambour centre appeared to be very limited. Factors which contributed to this were

- location (is Nambour the right town?)
- co-ordinator (has he time to do the job?)
- lack of facilities (e.g. library)
- problems in organising tutorials (for most students attendance was not obligatory)
- absence of suitable and identifiable centre

Similarly, Gladstone suffered deficiencies which restricted its use — absence of a library, limited hours of access, and little contact with Brisbane. However, there is evidence to suggest that by developing the existing facility on a co-operative basis with other tertiary institutions some of the problems could be overcome.

Toowoomba has a substantial group of Queensland students (over 200) and a very adequate building. The centre, however, has to compete with a very active College of Advanced Education which opens its facilities to the community including Queensland University students. Despite its potential the study centre is currently not functioning effectively. Whilst it suffers some difficulties similar to those at other centres, its success probably depends on two factors. The first is developing a wider range of users and activities for the centre. The second is the appointment of a co-ordinator who has both the time to devote to the centre and a proprietorial interest in its success.

Finally, the Mackay centre operates successfully with a relatively high degree of student usage, energetic management at the local level and is well regarded in the community.

At this stage it could be said that the Queensland network has considerable potential to improve its service to students. Some of the difficulties are local: some are related to administration from Brisbane. Many of the problems could be resolved economically and effectively by a thorough examination of the issues and a more aggressive approach to their solution.

RIVERINA COLLEGE OF ADVANCED EDUCATION

Albury/Wodonga

Study Centres were first established in Albury/Wodonga and Griffith in March, 1972. They were designed to meet the needs of part-time students in these areas. Since that time, the Albury/Wodonga campus (as it is now known) has moved to new premises, built to accommodate the expanding range of course offerings now available there. The branch campus is situated in the urban area of Albury, only a block away from the main street. The campus still caters primarily to on campus students, with 25 full-time and 425 part-time students. However, it also services about 50 off campus students in the region.

The Albury/Wodonga campus is a substantial building of modern design and decor. it provides seven lecture/tutorial rooms, a library, a laboratory, a large staff/student common room, eight staff offices, clerical offices, audio visual facilities, a room with four audio carrels, and computer facilities. Parking facilities for cars are located at the rear of the building.

The campus is open from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. from Monday to Thursday during teaching weeks and from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Fridays and during non-teaching periods. Pilot studies have revealed no consistent demands from Riverina students for regular weekend opening.

The branch campus employs 21 staff; a director, eight full-time academic staff, three part-time academic staff, one full-time library officer, a half-time library/clerical assistant, a

full-time typist, two full-time clerks/receptionists, one half-time clerical assistant, two casual clerical assistants on call and a half-time male general assistant.

The bulk of the teaching load at the campus is in first year subjects, so the aim of academic staffing arrangements at the campus is to attain self-sufficiency in providing for students at the first year level. At present, academic staff from Wagga travel to the campus regularly.

The campus acts as an advice centre to prospective off campus students, and is the place of initial contact. After this contact branch campus staff have little further contact with the students. All external courses are handled directly from Wagga. External students are not assigned to study centres, but are informed of their existence. The branch campus does not take any initiative with external students but does, however, provide services to external students when requested. It is a tutorial centre and an examination centre. The initiative for tutorials comes from Wagga, with the local campus making the physical arrangements.

Griffith

The Griffith Study Centre was established in 1972, at the same time as the Albury Study Centre. It was expected that these centres would provide essentially the same services for students of the Riverina College who were remote from the main campus. The intervening period, however, has seen very great differences in the development of the two centres. At the Albury Centre the provision of tertiary education has increased to the extent that the centre has recently been designated as a secondary 'campus' and concentrates primarily on part-time studies. In Griffith, after a fairly strong initial demand for tertiary education, enrolments decreased and in recent years have stabilized at a relatively low level.

Both staff and students at the centre have encouraged a 'shop front' approach to education characterised by flexibility of facilities and programs and a non-threatening environment. The present building seems to suit these needs well. The centre is open generally from 9 a.m. to 9.30 p.m. most days of the week, apart from the 'quiet' mid-winter season (June to August). It seems the flexible hours suit most students and can easily be modified.

The College employs one full-time education officer (who co-ordinates and supervises the activities), and a full-time typist/clerk.

In addition over 50 local people are employed for part-time or casual tutoring in continuing education classes. Also, lecturers visit the centre from the Wagga Wagga campus fortnightly for classes with the tertiary correspondence students.

As well as the formal support services for students provided by the study centre, the education officer has provided other assistance. In 1979 some student self-help study groups were tried but did not seem to work satisfactorily. The students had not been prepared for these and seemed to have difficulty in using these meetings effectively. It appeared that students needed to be taught how to run discussion groups effectively. At present the education officer has instituted an informal system whereby students who are having difficulty with a subject are put in contact with other students who have previously successfully studied the subject.

VICTORIAN TAFE OFF CAMPUS NETWORK

A key feature of the TAFE Off Campus network in Victoria is not only that it offers educational opportunities to people irrespective of their place of residence, but that it provides *local* contact and support through the network centres.

The co-ordinating authority of the VTOCN takes the view that learning does not necessarily have to be of the formal, face-to-face type. In fact, the Mills Report (1978) suggests that home-based study, together with a local study centre providing a tutor and the occasional group sessions, may be a more effective form of learning for the adult student.

The VTOCN co-ordinating authority has direct responsibility for TAFE off campus programs. Its tasks are:

1. The development of TAFE courses/subjects and study materials. This is done in close consultation with the TAFE curriculum authorities and the Director of Technical Education's Advisory Committee on External Studies. The School provides expertise in the off-campus mode and production facilities, but brings in outside writers and consultants on a contractual basis to provide the general educational and content expertise necessary for individual subjects.

2. Co-ordination of the delivery system. In this capacity the TAFE Sector of the RMIT School of External Studies is responsible for:

   . preparation of submissions and negotiations requesting funds and staff establishment for the VTOCN;
   . The monitoring and reporting on VTOCN income and expenditure;
   . The co-ordination of enrolment quotas and procedures;
   . The monitoring and co-ordination of tutoring, seminars and workshops across the VTOCN;
   . The monitoring, co-ordination, and, where necessary, the preparation, of examinations across the VTOCN;
   . General publicity for the VTOCN;
   . Employment of Network tutors. These are used to look after students from a number, or maybe all, of the off campus centres where local tutors are not available. In the first year of offering a subject, the VTOCN attempts to employ the writers of the materials as Network tutors.

   (General Information, 1980: 4).

Off Campus Centres

> There are Off-Campus Centres located at fifteen TAFE Colleges/Schools throughout Victoria. Students enrol for off campus study through the Centre most convenient to them whether by virtue of where they live or where they work and thus become students of that College or School.
>
> Each Off Campus Centre is staffed by an Off Campus Co-ordinator, at Senior Teacher Level, and varying numbers of clerical support staff.
>
> The Off-Campus Centre is responsible for enrolling each student, supplying his or her study materials, handling the assignment traffic, employing local tutors, monitoring the progress of each student through his or her course of study and organising local workshops, seminars and other supports for the students.
>
> (General Information, 1980: 5).

The local off campus study centre should:

. make a wide range of learning resources accessible to students;
. provide opportunity for student-student and student-tutor contact;
. provide venues for meetings of students;
. be a source of information and advice to current and intending students; and
. provide physical facilities for study, when necessary.

Mills believes that the co-ordinator is the key to the decentralised system. He writes:

> His relationship with students is critical. A local person to whom the student can turn with confidence is in my view a vital component of a distance teaching system and intuitively one feels such a person has a considerable effect on student performance or lack of it.
>
> (Mills, 1978).

FIGURE TWO
Showing location of the VTOCN Off Campus Centres

The development of the VTOCN was an imaginative and far-sighted development. RMIT, to the extent that it sponsored the plan, is to be commended. As a new development and despite its difficulties, it extended the quality and accessibility of distance education for students in the TAFE sector. However, there are evidences of tension and strain in the system. These are not unexpected.

Firstly, the 'centres' vary considerably. Distance education is accorded differing importance within the colleges. Procedures are integrated within the college system in different ways. Co-ordinators have quite different views about their own roles and shape their jobs to meet their perceptions. As well, the relationship between individual centres and RMIT differ significantly, principally in terms of the extent to which they depend on services provided by RMIT.

All the centres appear successful in attracting students, but some less so in holding them. Indeed, discontinuation rates in some parts of the system are reportedly as high as 50 per cent or more. Reactions to this suggest one of the critical differences between centres. In some the high discontinuation rates are accepted with regret, but with little attempt to improve the situation. This attitude appears to reflect a more 'dependent' orientation towards RMIT characterised by more limited feelings both of autonomy and of responsibility. In others there is a much more proprietory concern with the local off campus system. In those cases the discontinuation issue is seen as a local college problem and attempts are made to ameliorate it. The point, however, is not the discontinuation rate but the differences in attitude towards it.

Centres, particularly those outside the metropolitan Melbourne area and in Geelong, have more limited resources in, for example, being able to appoint a full range of tutors and in attracting sufficient numbers of students to permit tutorial groups to be held across the full range of subjects. In those cases the centre depends not only on tutors provided by RMIT, but the students at the centre normally must travel to Melbourne for tutorials. This limits attendance substantially.

One of the irritations that manifests itself in the off campus centres is over the question of funding. The co-ordinating authority draws up estimates, prepares funding submissions, determines the budget on the basis of funds allocated and distributes funds to the constituent colleges. However, these funds are 'tied' and colleges do not have the freedom to use the total amount of money provided in a flexible way. There would be a preference, on the part of a number of colleges, for receiving a total grant for the off campus operation and being able to build that into the college budget as they saw fit. Again the point is not concerned with which view is correct but simply the identification of a source of tension.

In summary, RMIT has been the VTOCN co-ordinating body since its inception. The 15 participating technical colleges and schools throughout the state distribute centrally produced learning materials and provide contact for local students. The co-ordinating body, RMIT, maintains contact with study centres, produces study materials and trains and supervises network staff.

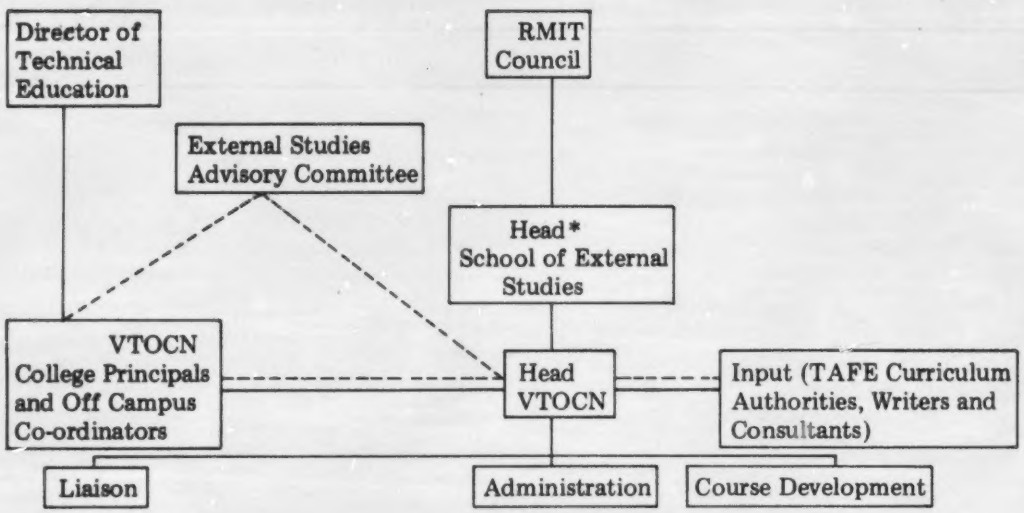

FIGURE THREE

Showing organisational relationships in the TAFE off campus studies system.

* who reports through the Assistant Director (Educational Services) to the Director of RMIT who in turn, reports to Council.

With these kinds of concerns, together with the attitudes towards autonomy, several of the centres want a restructuring of the system. Essentially this would require a change in the relationship with RMIT by allowing the network freedom to contract with suppliers of services without being compelled to use RMIT resources. Course development materials, production and other services could be contracted out to other suppliers by the network. The consortium of colleges, with RMIT as an equal partner, would thus control a distance education system in which colleges individually administered and delivered the courses which collectively they developed and produced. So far it has not been possible to gauge how strong this feeling is: it could be relatively isolated. But it is likely to develop. Again, the comment is included not to focus on the issue itself, but to illustrate that collaborative arrangements in education such as the VTOCN are subject to continual pressure because of demands for institutional autonomy. In particular, there is a clear reluctance to afford one institution a position of pre-eminence and control.

This suggests that while the VTOCN concept has appeal, at the tertiary level it would need to be modified to protect the drive of institutions towards achieving or maintaining autonomy. Otherwise, any such arrangement will be subject to pressures which will make it difficult if not impossible to operate in the longer term.

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

Deakin's policy was to establish study centres in appropriate places in Victoria that were likely to have sufficient numbers of students to make effective use of facilities. In each community the university sought co-operation from other educational institutions to set up study centres where teaching and learning facilities were already available. This policy was adopted to avoid unnecessary duplication of facilities.

In Melbourne Deakin developed a study centre in the same building as that occupied by the Council for Adult Education. The council co-operated closely, particularly with respect to library and audio visual facilities. Arrangements have also been made with centres for continuing education in Horsham, Mildura, Shepparton and Wangaratta to provide study centre facilities.

Arrangements with Ballarat, Bendigo, Gippsland and Warrnambool College of Advanced Education to provide study centre facilities for Deakin have been operating successfully for some years.

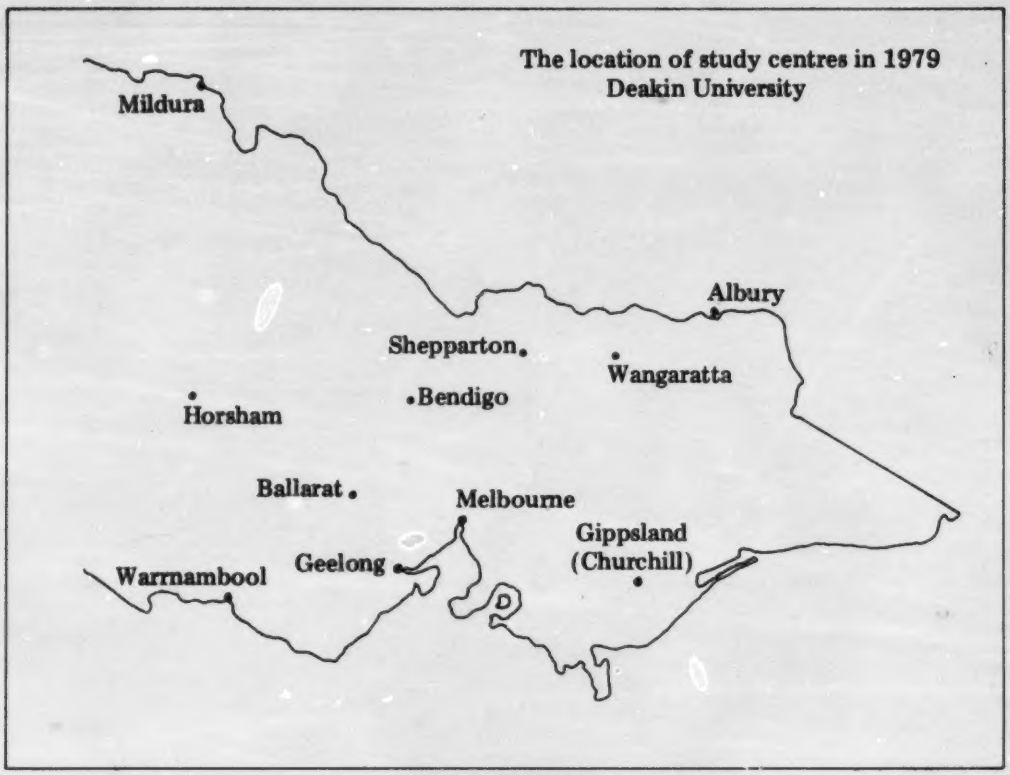

FIGURE FOUR
Location of Deakin University Study Centres

Deakin study centres were established with certain aims and objectives clearly in mind. In summary, these were to provide in provincial population centres

- a university presence;
- accommodation for occasional tutorials and lectures;
- facilities for storing, using and lending equipment;

- a meeting place for students; and
- a reference centre (for information and advice).

It is clear that, apart from the Melbourne Study Centre, Deakin students make only limited use of study centres. Taking the objectives one by one, several comments can be made.

Clearly the study centres have not in any sense provided a university presence in any of the communities. No Deakin 'sign' exists outside any of the study centres. Rarely is an area or office within a centre specifically designated as Deakin territory. In the continuing education centres there are notice boards and some displays of Deakin information, but this is quite limited. In the colleges even this is absent. Deakin University is not listed in local telephone or other service directories.

Some potential students make preliminary enquiries at the study centres but such enquiries are limited. It is fair to suggest that the majority of residents in any of the cities in which Deakin has a study centre are largely unaware that the university is so represented.

Centres do meet the objective of providing accommodation for tutorials and lectures. In no case, apart from the Melbourne study centre, are difficulties experienced in providing sufficient accommodation for these purposes. Occasionally there are timetabling problems and there have been one or two specific access problems, but apart from these the system works well. This is partly due to the relatively small number of tutorials held in country Victoria. The overall numbers of students in any district, spread over a range of subjects, means that in most centres excluding Melbourne three or four tutorials a week would be the maximum. Attendance at these tutorials seems to be about 50 per cent at best.

The question of attendance is an interesting one and deserves further exploration. There is some suggestion that students, at Wangaratta for instance, will not travel regularly to a tutorial in Shepparton (and vice versa) unless two or three can share the travelling. This seems more related to the effort required rather than to the cost, although the importance of the latter will no doubt increase. Another important factor is the tutor appointed. From discussions it seems that if the tutor is visiting from Deakin and is scheduled to provide a formal presentation, attendance could be reasonably good. If it is a local tutor then that tutor must be regarded by students as an 'expert' and not just someone who happens to have done that course a year or two earlier. However the feelings expressed may have represented personal attitudes rather than a general attitude.

Even more importantly tutors are not always well informed by Deakin, and may see little tangible reward in extending their knowledge of Deakin. They often tend to identify with their students rather than see themselves as representing the university. In summary, it would appear that whilst accommodation for tutorials is assured by study centres, the effectiveness of tutorials in general still leaves much to be desired.

In relation to the third objective, study centres are reasonably well equipped to service students. Demand from students is limited largely to video viewing and, in some instances where the facility is available, photo copying. There is thus no call to borrow equipment. Indeed, many students have access in their work places to all the equipment they need.

From the inception of its distance education system Deakin recognised that student numbers in more remote areas would not allow tutorials to be held. It also recognised that contact with the university might not be easy. Self-help groups amongst students were therefore encouraged. These, it was thought, could meet at study centres as perhaps a reasonably central location. However indications are that this does not occur. Where such groups are established, they meet in students' homes. There is no evidence to suggest that students view study centres as a local 'campus' to which they belong.

Finally, it is clear that study centres do not serve effectively as information centres. They do provide access to the host institution's library and related resources. Regional libraries

in other centres provide this service. Library usage, however, seems quite limited. It is likely that Deakin's library provides a more effective service. It uses a 24-hour door-to-door delivery service. The university pays the charges both ways. However, staff at Deakin's library believe that off campus students make far less use of the library than they would hope. No doubt this is related to the relative 'completeness' of Deakin learning materials at least at the first and second levels.

Other information about Deakin is provided only to a limited extent in study centres. If printed materials are provided they will be displayed. However, enquiries from established students that require accurate and up-to-date information about Deakin are rarely answerable by study centre staff. They rarely feel confident that they have the necessary knowledge; Deakin provides far too little information for them, and there is no substantial incentive for these staff, who are busy with their other commitments, to invest the effort that would be required to make them competent to deal with enquiries.

Few such enquiries are directed to the colleges, which provide study centre facilities, presumably because, with the exception of tutors, there is no obvious person to whom to address them.

A history of one or two unsuccessful enquiries probably persuades students that contact with Deakin itself is necessary to get the information they need.

Much of what has been said has been specifically excepted in the case of the Melbourne Study Centre. This centre is atypical in that it services a large number of students and is managed by a full-time Deakin staff member whose ability to deal with student problems increases as her knowledge of Deakin expands. In general, however, the overall impression is that Deakin study centres are not achieving the objectives set for them and are providing students at a distance with only the most limited services.

DISCUSSION

This study has examined the study centre systems of four institutions engaged in distance education. An attempt has been made to:

- understand the institutional context within which each of the distance education system works;
- explore the nature of the distance education system provided by those institutions.
- identify the philosophy and practice relating to each of the study centre operations;
- examine individual study centres in each of the systems to determine what they provide and what use students make of them; and
- to set these study centres in the context of their local communities.

The discussion that follows covers a number of broad questions.

- Why do some institutions engaged in distance education develop study centre systems?
- What is a study centre in terms of facilities, functions and staff?
- How do students use study centres and what factors determine whether they use them?
- Is there a special problem with libraries in study centres?
- How much do study centres cost?
- What criteria are available to judge whether a study centre is successful or not?
- Is it possible to describe an 'ideal' study centre?
- Is it possible to see one or more networks of study centres developing that cross institutional boundaries and provide 'national' coverage?

1. Why do distance education systems develop study centres?

The introductory review of support systems, whilst not representing an exhaustive treatment, shows that there is an increasing concern with providing adequate support services for off campus students. Not only is this true of systems which provide learning materials of modest quality: it is also true of systems which are acknowledged as providing self-instructional learning materials of the highest quality. In other words the quality of learning materials does not appear to obviate a perceived need to provide support services for students. The objectives of such services may vary but seem to include

- enhancing the learning experience;
- providing access to educational facilities without which the learning cannot take place (libraries, laboratories and the like);

- integrating off campus students into the university (or college) community so that they become more than 'passers of examinations';
- facilitating interaction between staff and students and among students themselves so that, through dialogue, the learning experience is more than the simple absorption of knowledge; and
- motivating the student to remain 'on course' rather than discontinuing.

No doubt that list can be extended.

The review shows that different distance education systems emphasise different kinds of support services. Compulsory vacation schools; individual counselling/mentoring; telephone tutorial networks and networks of study centres are just some of the options. The paradox inherent in distance education has also been noted — that although distance education promises the off campus student the opportunity to pursue a course by means of independent study and although the learner can acquire (in most cases) all that is necessary from materials provided by the institution there is still a strong compulsion to provide face-to-face interactive supports in the ways suggested.

There appear to be several reasons for this.

In the first place, despite the avowal that distance learning is a valid alternative mode of education providing not only equal opportunity but an educational experience of equal quality, there is ambivalence on the part of those providing for the learner at a distance. An ambivalence reflected in the feeling that while on the one hand the learner can enjoy a minimally acceptable learning experience through self instructional materials, on the other hand there are deficiencies in such an education that can only be remedied by face-to-face contact or its nearest equivalent.

Secondly, there is a concern about equality of educational opportunity. In many institutions that teach off campus students it is possible or even mandatory that on campus students have access to all the materials that are distributed to off campus students. The result of this is that the on campus student has, in addition to the materials his off campus counterpart receives, all the facilities of the campus at his disposal including library, lectures, tutorial, staff consultants and interaction with his fellow students. To equalise the educational opportunities of the off campus student attempts are made to provide him with more face-to-face contact.

Thirdly, there is a concern for equivalence of standards. This is achieved in part by having the same assessment procedures. But there is real concern expressed in some quarters that if staff do not actually see students then the work submitted by a student may not actually be his. At best the reassurance provided by face-to-face contact in this respect is illusory but it nonetheless stimulates a desire for such contact.

Finally, it might even be suggested that the security and satisfaction of the lecturer depend in some measure on being able to get feed back from students. The face-to-face contact is to reassure the lecturer that he or she is valued by students.

Whatever the reasons there are strong compulsions to support systems that facilitate staff-student interaction in face-to-face situations.

The more specific question is why distance education systems select study centres as a major support mechanism rather than any of the alternatives mentioned.

Basically there seem to be three options. One is the weekend or vacation school, often compulsory, in which the student travels to the campus for periods of concentrated activity. A second is the study centre which requires either local staff appointments or staff to travel from the main campus or a combination of both. The third option is to use technology to allow the lecturer, remaining on campus, to interact with the student who also remains in his own locale. An example is the telephone tutorial and to a lesser extent video and audio programs distributed either by direct broadcast or cassette. While the advantages and disadvantages of each could be analysed it is intended here to examine

only the factors that lead to the study centre option being selected (noting of course that the options are not exclusive and are often combined).

In addition to the more general factors noted previously that encourage face-to-face support, study centres are developed for several reasons.

- they provide the university or college with a local presence and as well as serving enrolled students may actually help to attract new students;
- they avoid loading students with the potentially high cost of travel in both money and time required by attending vacation or weekend schools.
- they are easier to manage than are the logistics involved in complex schedules of vacation schools; and
- the belief that a 'good' study centre provides the best substitute for the student who is remote from the facilities of the main campus.

No doubt the motives are more complex than suggested above but an examination of the statements made within institutions that use study centres tends to support this picture.

2. What is a Study Centre?

This is not such an easy question to answer. In attempting to do so the question is considered under a number of headings:

- definition
- types of centre
- facilities
- functions, and
- staffing.

Definition:

In an earlier section of the report a definition of study centres was offered. That definition emerged as the study progressed. In thinking about its appropriateness some modification seems necessary. As a working definition then the following formulation is offered.

A study centre is a physical facility, appropriately staffed, provided by an institution

- normally at a location remote from its main campus;
- often using the facilities and staff of another institution or organisation;
- providing students in the locality of the study centre with access to facilities and services required for their courses; and
- with only limited responsibility for those students.

Such a definition can be applied to the study centres examined in the present study with somewhat interesting results.

Firstly, the Victorian TAFE Off Campus Network. It is suggested that the colleges that make up the network cannot usefully be regarded as study centres. Initially when the network was established this was less clear. Perhaps because in its first year or so of operation all the students in the network were still enrolled as RMIT students. It was therefore logical to view other colleges as study centres which serviced RMIT students. However, that situation changed rapidly. The students are now enrolled students of the local college which takes full academic and administrative responsibility for them. That responsibility for students is normally discharged by providing all the necessary services for them at the local campus and by allowing them access to any facilities they may need. The courses offered lead, for the most part, to an award of the local college. Thus the study centre or the off campus centre as it is referred to in the network is really the administrative arm of the college that manages its off campus operation.

It does not seem sensible to designate a college as a study centre for its own students if by doing so it implies the provision of services and facilities that would otherwise be un-

available. Rather it is more useful to consider the network as a consortium of colleges which in relation to off campus studies, has certain centralised functions:

- development and production of course materials;
- budgetary allocations;
- provision of network tutors; and
- policy recommendations.

Not that this came about because the colleges, by agreement, centralised these activities but rather because a central agency, in proposing a decentralised system, determined that these should be centralised functions. However, now that the network is operating it is probably best understood as a consortium of colleges with a central body which could be independent of any one college, but would act on behalf of all member colleges in agreed areas.

This is not to diminish in any way the value of the initiative RMIT took in developing the network in the first place. It is a particularly valuable model of institutional co-operation in distance education. Nor does it suggest that such a network does not need a strong central co-ordinating authority. Without a strong co-ordinating authority the network would be in danger of fragmenting.

There seems little doubt that the network will continue to evolve and that despite its problems it will remain a sound approach to collaboration in distance education.

However, its relevance to this study should be seen in that light rather than using its constituent colleges as examples of study centres.

Secondly, a similar question can be raised in relation to the Albury/Wodonga campus of the Riverina College of Advanced Education. Whilst it may be used by Riverina off campus students as a study centre it exists primarily to service on campus students. The extent of the facilities provided and the range of staff available are determined entirely by the needs of the on campus population. Indeed it is likely that if it were not for such students no Riverina centre would exist in Albury: certainly the number of off campus students in the area would be considerably more if the Albury campus did not provide for on campus students. However, if the Albury centre were to service only off campus students it is clear that it would have been a very different centre with much more limited facilities and staffing.

The problem then is one of degree. No other study centre compares with Riverina's Albury centre. Whether one considers the Toowoomba or Mackay centres of Queensland University which service some hundreds of off campus students or the Melbourne Study Centre of Deakin University which services well over a thousand students there is no doubt that no study centre designed to service only off campus students is likely to be as extensive as the Albury centre. The provision of staff and facilities such as those provided in Albury requires an on campus population to justify them.

Thirdly, some comment about the Deakin centres which are identified with Colleges of Advanced Education is appropriate. It is suggested that these may be better viewed as 'reciprocal access' arrangements rather than as study centres. There is nothing that visibly constitutes a Deakin study centre in any of the colleges. No staff member is in charge of the centre (although a member of the college staff may be nominated as the college liaison officer). Tutors themselves arrange tutorials and rooms. The College library extends to Deakin off campus students library privileges often no different from those it extends to other members of the community. Audio visual requirements may be negotiated by Deakin students in the same way that any student of the college may do.

It is true that Deakin makes a per capita payment to the Colleges to cover any incidental costs incurred by the college in servicing Deakin students. It is also true that Deakin places in the college library books and audio visual material that the college library would not otherwise hold. Even so, the way in which the colleges service Deakin students is better regarded as a 'reciprocal access' arrangement. Indeed one of the colleges specific-

ally recognises this and does not accept a per capita payment for students. It argues that it provides those services for students in its region enrolled at any tertiary institution. Likewise Deakin itself provides similar services to students living in the Geelong region who are enrolled at other tertiary institutions and does so without charge.

Again this is not to diminish the contribution that colleges make to Deakin off campus students nor to suggest that 'reciprocal access' is not an effective way in which to service off campus students: it is rather suggesting that it is an alternative expression of the study centre concept.

Whilst these points are being made about what constitutes a study centre and what does not, the discussion that follows will continue to make reference to all four systems where it seems helpful to do so.

Types of Centre:

Study centres are established in one of several ways.

Firstly, there is the purpose built centre, owned and maintained by an institution and designed to serve its own students. The prime example in the present study is the Toowoomba study centre of the University of Queensland. A similar centre belonging to the same university is at Mackay, although of more modest construction and servicing a wider body of students. Another variant is the leasehold centre which is none-the-less specifically designed and constructed as a study centre and exemplified by the Melbourne study centre of Deakin University. It should be noted that the purpose built type of centre is the least common.

Secondly, there is the centre provided by another institution or organisation in which it allows its facilities to be used by students of the distant institution. Examples are to be found in the Queensland University centre of Nambour in which a high school serves as the study centre and the Deakin centres at Bendigo and Wangaratta where the centres are provided respectively by a college of advanced education and a centre for continuing education. Two points of distinction might be noted. Financial arrangements are broadly of two types: in the first payment is made to the person who runs the centre (Queensland University) while in the second payment is made to the institution or organisation providing the facilities (Deakin University). A different issue is to be found in the 'mission' of the organisations that provide the facilities: in some that mission is complementary to that of the organisation for whom they are providing the service, while in others it is competitive. Examples of the former are high schools and centres for continuing education while an example of the latter is a college of advanced education which may offer not only parallel courses but have its own distance education program offering similar and equivalent programs.

Facilities:

Clearly there is a range of facilities commonly provided at a study centre. These include:

- Rooms for tutorials, meetings or interviews;
- Audio visual equipment;
- Teletutorial facilities;
- A library;
- Photocopying facilities;
- Reception and enquiry services; and
- Common room and refreshment facilities.

Centres vary in the extent to which they provide these facilities. The best equipped are the colleges which provide the full range of facilities for their own students and allow them to be used by students of the study centre. At all centres there is reasonable accommodation by way of meeting rooms although in a centre such as Deakin's Melbourne Study Centre usage peaks in the early evening and at weekends. During these

periods accommodation is insufficient whilst between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. on weekdays it is significantly under used. Some centres have small library collections and employ librarians, mostly part-time: in other cases the regional library collections are augmented. Most, but not all, have audio replay facilities and Deakin centres have video replay capacity. (The differences in providing audio visual equipment are dictated by the use of media in courses). Teletutorial facilities are fairly common but not extensively used by institutions and centres in this study. Similarly a student common room and tea or coffee making facilities are not unusual.

Beyond the facilities listed there is little else that students appear to need. The question of how these facilities are used and to what extent will be discussed later.

Functions:

What the study centre does is closely related to its facilities. There is no doubt that the four major functions of a centre used by students are:

- tutorials and other institution sponsored meetings;
- library;
- information and advice; and
- video replay.

As far as other facilities are concerned usage is more limited or incidental. Many students do make use of the common room and coffee-making facilities when they attend the centre. If the centre has a library then a student when using the library is quite likely to use a photo copier if one is available. Few students use a study centre for private study. Self-help groups tend not to use study centres. Increasing use is being made of teletutorials but these are institution sponsored meetings and best regarded as a variant of the formal tutorial.

It could be argued that study centres also serve as examination centres. Whilst this is true it is a use that has not been discussed in the present study. The use of a study centre for this purpose is more an institutional use rather than a student use. Examinations are compulsory and the student must sit them at the most convenient location provided. Examination centres in all systems are much more widely distributed than the study centres and this usage is better understood as part of the institution's examination system than of the study centre system.

Tutorials. Tutorials represent the single most important function of study centres in this study. In the case of Queensland centres tutorials are relatively frequent. A minimum of four students allows tutorials to be provided once a fortnight and ten or more allows them to be weekly. Moreover Queensland materials are designed on the basis that there will be regular tutorials in most subjects. In the case of Deakin materials it is not assumed that students will have access to tutorials. In some Deakin courses tutorials are as frequent as once a fortnight but more often they are much less frequent. Instead, Saturday workshops or weekend schools are used and may occur perhaps twice a semester. In all systems attendance at tutorials is variable. On average it seems that attendance ranges around 50 per cent. It also seems that in general, students who attend do so regularly whilst some students never attend.

Several factors influence attendance. In the Queensland system attendance is compulsory, unless specifically waived, for those living within a reasonable distance of the city. In the Deakin system attendance is not compulsory. Executive officers, tutors and many students in the Queensland system feel that it would be easier to manage the tutorial system if all students were required to attend regardless of distance from the centre. Some tutors in the Deakin system feel that tutorial attendance should be made compulsory. Clearly there is considerable dissatisfaction with attendance levels at tutorials.

An important factor in determining attendance is the tutor; students evaluate critically the ability of the tutor to help them in their courses. To be favourably regarded by

students tutors need to demonstrate that they have substantial competence in the discipline *and* that they are familiar with the structure and requirements of the course. This may appear to be stating the obvious but students in a number of instances commented on the inadequacy of tutors in one or other or both of these respects. In addition the way a tutor conducts sessions appears highly relevant. The student who attends expects value for time spent. For many students this means being provided with information that will be useful in doing assignments or passing examinations. Accordingly most students respond more favourably to a structured, topic centred, tutor dominated tutorial than they do to a laissez-faire discussion with little tutor direction. Finally students expect tutors to take a personal interest in them, to be accessible and willing to provide some individual help. In particular students like a tutor to be able to give them feedback on 'how they are going' in the course. There are clear indications that some tutors acquire a highly regarded local reputation that influences the enrolment patterns of students. Some students enrol in one course rather than another because of the quality of the local tutor.

Other factors that have a bearing on attendance are such things as convenience of location, suitable seating and reasonable heating in winter. However, these factors seem marginal. A more significant factor appears to be the general atmosphere of the study centre influenced largely by the co-ordinator or other staff. If the attitude of staff is seen as positive and facilitative students tend to have a more positive attitude to activities at the study centre. The reverse also applies.

In summary it might be said that tutorials are supported best given a good tutor (as seen by students), regular weekly or fortnightly meetings, and when they are topic centred and tutor directed. Many students regard a 'mini' lecture as the best tutorial. Despite all these limitations, the tutorial, across the systems included in the present study, is the main function for which students use study centres.

Library. Library usage represents a second major function. However because the library is such a central feature in tertiary education it is afforded more extensive treatment in a later section devoted specifically to it.

Information and advisory services. Information and advisory services are the third main function for which students use centres. For example it was abundantly clear in the VTOCN system that by far the most important use students made of the centres was for information and advice. Naturally, in the case of that network, the co-ordinator is able to give advice. He or she is a 'teacher', employed in most cases full-time, by a college which is part of the network and the co-ordinator works on the college campus with easy access to colleagues. This allows the co-ordinator to function effectively as an advisor. Contrast this with the Queensland situation where executive officers at study centres are part-time, have only limited knowledge of the university and are working at a distance from it. Indeed the contrast is more stark in the case of Deakin co-ordinators, who can have only limited knowledge of the university, who receive no remuneration for their personal activities in respect to Deakin, and who may have little contact with Deakin.

Clearly then there is a great deal of variation in the ability of a study centre to provide information and advice.

In looking at the kind of information and advice that may be sought from a centre some comments can be made. Among potential students the major enquiries to a study centre are for rather specific and detailed information about the institution, be it university or college, and about specific courses and programs within the institution. For many of these enquirers the information they are seeking is contained in university or college handbooks. Often, however,the kind of information sought is much less sharply focused.

What are the opportunities on graduation from such a course or program? Are there choices to be made which could increase the marketability of the award? Should alternative courses or programs be considered — at that institution or another? Indeed the questions might be as broad as asking what is required for a student in tertiary educa-

tion to be successful. The requirements of such enquiriers are such that meeting their needs entails more than the provision of factual data: it moves into the areas of advising and counselling.

Until recent years this was not such a great problem. Those entering tertiary education were, in the main, school leavers. The range of choices was smaller. Information, albeit limited, was available in school libraries and teachers filled the role of advisors. Today however an increasing proportion of students entering tertiary education are mature age entrants. Often the step of returning to study is a much larger one and the issues they wish to explore in making the decision are more varied. When such intending students are going to become off campus students it is even more appropriate that they receive information and advice about the full range of opportunities available to them. Relatively few study centres have staff who have the background knowledge or the time to assist in this way. Those study centres with such resources report increasing calls upon them for this kind of service.

In the case of enrolled students the enquiries coming to study centres fall roughly into two categories. Administrative issues related to what is happening in the student's course — when and where examinations are to be held, what has happened to the next issue of course materials, why the last assignment has not yet been returned, what must be done about re-enrolment and the like. Most distance education programs provide some of this information in a standaridsed way but not always at the time the student wants to know. Student needs for information are generated by their own schedules, activities and anxieties. Being able to secure answers to such questions at the time they want them is regarded by both students and staff of study centres as important.

For other established students their needs are more academic. The opportunity to discuss with someone the meaning of a tutor's comments on an assignment. A better understanding of what the courses they are considering taking next year are really about. Whether or not as students they are getting out of the University or College experience all that they should. Such questions range from the very specific to the broadest possible.

Clearly if the informational needs of both intending and established students are of these kinds then a major role for a study centre is that of providing information in such a way that it merges into an advisory, counselling function. Again, few centres appear equipped to do this. Students who approach study centres once or twice and find no satisfaction cease making such approaches. Staff who find they do not possess the background to assist in this way automatically refer the student to the main campus. Indeed staff at the main campus would be unhappy if they thought such advising was being undertaken at centres. They would feel staff there are generally not properly equipped to give such advice and counsel. Yet staff at the main campus are often extremely difficult to contact. The loser appears to be the student. Perhaps one element in the alleged higher attrition rate of off campus students is the deficiency in the provision of information, advice and counselling. Nonetheless, it remains clear that a major call on study centres is for just such a facility.

Video replay. The needs for audio visual equipment in study centres are quite varied and depend very much on how much use courses make of such materials. In general a very high proportion of students possess or have access to audio equipment and rarely look to a study centre for this purpose. Where video is concerned far fewer students have such equipment but considerable numbers have access to it, for example at the schools in which they work. Study centres are used for video replay. However, the frequency with which video replay facilities (beyond those occasions when a tutorial group may use a video cassette) are used is considerably less than expected. The only one of the four institutions making extensive use of video is Deakin and it would appear that many of its students make little use of video material. At least only a small proportion of them do so at study centres. Nonetheless it still remains an important function of a study centre to supply such a facility for those students who wish to avail themselves of it.

Staffing

Staffing arrangements in study centres vary considerably although it is true to say that the variation is more between systems than between individual centres. Thus VTOCN centres, for the most part, have a full-time co-ordinator and some clerical assistance. Riverina College staffs its Albury/Wodonga campus to meet the needs of a considerable part-time on campus student population and its staffing is therefore quite atypical. Queensland employs part-time officers-in-charge and part-time librarians depending on the size of the population serviced by the study centre. Deakin depends on staff in the local institution or organisation to do whatever is required, but does not employ staff other than in its Melbourne Study Centre. Queensland and Deakin Universities and the VTOCN make considerable use of local part-time tutors.

These examples would suggest that the various types of staff employed may have quite different commitments to the study centre. In the VTOCN system it is clearly the co-ordinator's principal professional activity and as such he has a considerable personal investment in making the centre a success. This is not true of the officers-in-charge employed by Queensland University where their major professional commitment is to another job and another employer. Their standing within the community or advancement within their profession is probably only marginally affected by the success or otherwise of the study centre. However, there is personal commitment and a contractual responsibility to the university for certain tasks that clearly obligates these staff members. In the case of Deakin not only are the individual's loyalties primarily to his own organisation rather than to Deakin but he or she is not employed by Deakin and generally undertakes Deakin tasks as an 'extra' for which the organisation but not the staff member receives recompense.

These comments do not suggest that financial rewards are the critical factor in determining whether staff do their job well or not. A strong general impression of staff in study centres is of their commitment to serving students to the best of their ability. However such staff members have to determine for themselves their own sets of priorities and no doubt duty to their main employer must dictate the extent to which they can meet these supplementary calls on their time and energy.

These comments refer particularly to those who administer the study centres. There are of course tutors employed by the institutions who conduct tutorials at the centres. In both the VTOCN and Deakin systems tutors do not appear to identify strongly with the study centres although in the former it is the centre that negotiates their contracts.

The study centre is little more than the provider of space. Whilst there is insufficient evidence to make too much of it there is some suggestion that in the Queensland system tutors may have a stronger identification with study centres. Tutorials in that system are more frequent: contact with the main campus is limited. Negotiations for their employment are effected by the officers-in-charge at the study centres. Without making too much of the point it does seem that they become a study centre staff resource in a way that is not true of the other systems. However even in that system it does not seem to be a staff resource that is fully exploited. There would seem considerable scope for integrating local tutors into the study centre to a greater degree than is currently the case.

In earlier sections of this report it has been made clear that a critical factor in the success of a study centre is the staff. Indeed this is regarded as the single most important factor. In some cases the question of how best to staff a study centre has received far less consideration than it warrants. For example, the appointment of an officer-in-charge or a co-ordinator may be determined more by protocol and the position the person holds than by selecting the best person available for the job. Clearly the restraints imposed by inter-institutional arrangements limit freedom of choice in many cases. If however the nature of the staffing arrangements is vital to the success of a centre then it ought to become a primary rather than secondary consideration.

In this respect the Deakin system faces problems. If its students and potential students are to be effectively serviced by study centres a staff member needs to be provided who has:

- a clearly defined responsibility to the University and to students in the area served by the study centre
- an accurate and relatively comprehensive knowledge of Deakin and its courses;
- the necessary personal capacities — initiative, organising ability, communication and interpersonal skills;
- time available to both create and do the job;
- a commitment to students that will allow the 'out of hours' demands of the job to be met; and
- a proprietary interest in creating a successful study centre.

The tangible rewards should be adequate and equitable in view of what is expected of such an individual.

The problem for Deakin is that in its College based study centres it has no provision for employing such a person nor could it expect a member of College staff to fill the role envisaged. In those study centres located at centres for continuing education whilst it is easier for the co-ordinators of those centres to meet some of these expectations it is unrealistic to expect them to meet all of them requires consideration of facilities, functions and staffing together with role definition. If Deakin is to establish study centres that meet the full range of student needs it must resolve this staffing dilemma.

The situation is less difficult in the case of Queensland University which contracts directly with the staff it wishes to employ in study centres. In its purpose built centres it has complete freedom to choose the most appropriate person. In at least one case the success of the study centre reflects that selection in which the officer-in-charge embodies the equivalent requirements previously mentioned. The difficulty lies with Queensland's self imposed restriction of seeking the officer-in-charge first from a particular and small group of people — deputy principals of schools. Where a high school is designated as a study centre it may be difficult to do otherwise. However it may still be true that the use of school facilities with an officer-in-charge who is not the right person will produce a far less successful study centre than the converse. That is, the right co-ordinator will negotiate the facilities needed by students, and will generate effective use of them.

What has been said so far should not be taken as criticism of co-ordinators or officers-in-charge. The great majority of them are committed, competent and willing to help, but often lacking the time and appropriate resources to do so. What is more to the point is that institutions have failed to specify what they require, to provide resources so that the job can be done and to reward adequately people who do the job.

In concluding the discussion on what a study centre is, it is clear that whilst no single type of study centre is being advocated an understanding of the nature of study centres requires consideration of facilities, function and staffing, together with role definition and the identification of the appropriate organisational arrangements to provide such centres.

3. How do students use study centres, and what factors determine usage.

Clearly the foregoing discussion on the nature of study centres has already covered much that is relevant to student usage. It is not proposed to repeat that discussion but rather to add some general points.

Firstly, in all systems the amount of use of study centres generally by off campus students is limited. A single exception might be the VTOCN system where considerable numbers of students seek information or advice from the off campus centre. Clearly however much of this contact is quite routine often by telephone and quickly dealt with. Queensland centres are used rather more for tutorials. Deakin study centres, Mel-

bourne excepted, receive only minimal use. Overall the use made of study centres is much less than is considered desirable by the institutions that provide them.

Broadly speaking three types of factors seem to have a bearing on whether students use study centres.

- personal factors;
- factors related to the study centres themselves;
- factors related to the institution and its courses.

Personal factors. Under this heading can be included such things as educational background, learning skills and learning styles, dependency and other social and personal needs, reasons for undertaking courses, family and domestic circumstances, and domicile in relation to the centre. These factors are interactive. Some students remote from study centres attend tutorials regularly and some close at hand never attend. Experienced and capable students with quite independent learning styles use study centre facilities whilst less capable and more dependent students may not. A mix of factors determines usage.

Quite often it is said that the off campus student, because he is such a student, wishes to be entirely free of attendance requirements. This assertion does not have the general validity often assumed. For some students the choice of the off campus mode is dictated by circumstances such as distance or scheduling. Occasional attendance requirements may be welcomed by these students. For them the choice of this mode reflects a desire to avoid the rigid attendance demands of an on campus course but does not imply that they are unwilling to attend occasionally. Whilst some do not require social contact nor feel the need to participate in tutorials others value personal interaction. Discussion with off campus students indicated that the proportion of those preferring not to attend either campus or study centre for virtually any purpose would be at the most 20 to 25 per cent. The great bulk of students appreciate some contact provided it fits their timetables, is conveniently located, focused on their courses and may be used or not at their discretion. It is therefore *not* correct to assume that most students enrolled as off campus students neither need nor want contact with the campus (or study centre) or with staff or students. However their needs for such contacts are tempered in a significant way by other factors and their needs for contact are often less salient than these other factors.

Factors related to Study Centres. These include the following:

i. Location. Most study centres are located near the centres of the cities or communities they serve. Some centres appear to be marginally disadvantaged by location but no more than that. Parking facilities and the availability of public transport are issues that affect only a few students. In general, it would seem that study centres are best located near other facilities (shops, banks, post offices) and in well lighted areas (as much of their use is at night). Beyond that there did not seem much evidence to suggest that location, amongst the centres studied, had any significant effect on usage.

ii. Accommodation. In no case did there seem to be an accommodation problem. Timetabling sometimes presented difficulties but only to a minor extent. The greatest call on accommodation was for tutorial purposes and library usage. Clearly a study centre can be set up with relatively few rooms to cater for quite a large student body.

iii. Furniture and Furnishings. These appeared to be less satisfactory. In some cases furniture was that provided for school children and no provision was made for comfortable seating in informal settings. Tea and coffee making facilities were generally but not always available. Heating, cooling, lighting and general decor appeared to have no bearing on whether students used the centre or not. The influence of furniture and furnishings seems again to be marginal.

iv. Equipment. Equipment was much more variable. It ranged from centres that provided almost nothing in the way of audio visual equipment, photocopiers or teletutorial

facilities through to those that had all of these and more. The absence of such equipment in itself is not necessarily perceived as a deficiency. For example, if the study centre does not have a library then students generally expressed no need for access to a photocopier. Likewise if courses do not include audio visual learning materials students do not feel that the centre requires audio visual equipment. Generally the only feeling expressed about equipment was the observation that the more varied and complete the equipment of the study centre the more occasion there might be for students to use it.

v. Library. There was a strong feeling on the part of both students and staff associated with study centres that library facilities were extremely valuable. In centres where there is no library collection this was seen as a major deficiency: in centres where there was such a collection it was seen as a major reason for students to use the centre. This applied most clearly in Queensland and New South Wales but less so in Victoria. In Queensland it should be pointed out that the Thatcher Library and its staff received nothing but unqualified praise for the quality of the service provided. Libraries located in Queensland study centres were not seen as replacing the Thatcher Library but as providing students with a local opportunity to broaden their reading and to save mailing costs.

It can be concluded from the foregoing discussion that while physical aspects of the study centre should not be ignored they are not the most critical factors. There is little evidence to suggest that in general they either keep students away or encourage their attendance. The exception, of course, is library materials.

Factors relating to the institution and its courses.

The kind of factors under discussion here are fairly much a matter of stating the obvious. Courses vary in the extent to which they use audio visual materials. Where a course makes use of only the print medium students will have no need to use audio visual equipment at a study centre. Indeed it is only where a course uses video materials that students need the study centre as most have their own audio replay facilities. But even if video material is used in a course whether students view it will depend on the function of that material within the course. If it is enrichment only then students are more likely to exercise their right not to view it. If it is core material, examinable or even just highly relevant to central themes in the course it is more likely to be viewed.

Courses differ too in the extent to which they require reading beyond the course materials provided and the prescribed texts which the student is expected to purchase. Deakin courses tend to be more self contained in this respect: Queensland courses require more library use. No doubt these distinctions will be less noticeable among the higher level courses. But even this factor is confounded by the availability of highly regarded mail order services from the main campus libraries. In other cases the student has access to alternative library facilities. So that even with a highly valued study centre facility alternatives available to students reduce the use of this facility. What is clear however is that it is not simply the availability of books at study centres that is the important factor — it is the availability of the librarian as a resource person who can provide advice and who can negotiate on behalf of the student when he needs materials not available at the study centre.

Similarly courses differ in the extent to which tutors will be seen as a valuable and essential component of a course and likely to contribute significantly to a student's performance in assignments or examinations. The Queensland system sees tutorials as a more necessary component than does the Deakin system. Within the Deakin system however some courses place more importance on tutorials than others.

Beyond individual course requirements there is also the matter of the institutions' philosophy of distance education and the kind of courses it produces as an expression of that philosophy. While all systems make it possible for the isolated student to complete many of their courses many systems do stress the need for and the value of attendance and

contact. For those systems the 'normal' student is the one who attends for some purposes on some occasions: it is the exceptional student who manages without any attendance. In the Deakin system the reverse is the case: it is the student who does not attend who is regarded as the 'norm' and for whom courses are designed. How much difference this makes to attendance patterns cannot be quantified but students indicate that in a number of instances they enrolled at a particular institution because of its philosophy and practice in respect of attendance requirements. It might be added that despite differences in philosophy, practices tend to become more uniform over time.

The most general conclusion that can be drawn about study centre usage is that students use them when they are the most convenient alternative. If self-help groups meet they usually do so in the homes of one of the students: it is more comfortable and convenient, particularly for the student who hosts meetings. If students have video replay facilities at work and can borrow the cassettes they often prefer to do this. Many prefer to use the mail order library service rather than use the more limited collections available at study centres. Similarly if a tutor decided to hold tutorials in his or her home then students would cease to use the centre for this purpose. The point being made is that few, if any, facilities at study centres make it essential that students use them.

4. Is there a special problem with libraries in study centres?

In a recent paper Allen (1979) discussed the role of University and College libraries in distance education. The following extracts and quotations say something about the role of the library in higher education.

> It is the hallmark of tertiary education that it prepares students not only to think for themselves, but also to acquire the intellectual techniques and practical skills to discover and critically examine the facts on which their 'hinking must be based. The prime function of the college library is to ensure that the students learn how to find out.
>
> (Libraries in Colleges of Advanced Education, 1971: 3).

> It must be certain that learning does not cease upon qualification and that it must recognize the need for all students to obtain a liberal education, to enable them to cope with the changing needs of society. Such aims require but two essentials:
>
> (a) The student motivation towards the development of continuing self-learning and the application of the knowledge so gained; and
>
> (b) The student's access to comprehensive library resources.
>
> (Standards for Libraries and Technical Institutes, 1973: 2).

Allen goes on to say:

> This concern for the relationship between formal higher education, the development of the ability in the student to learn outside the formal framework, and to continue the process after graduation, and the assumption that libraries and library resources are necessarily involved in this process, is widespread. 'Interest in reading cannot be separated from the development of a critical attitude as a compulsory and continuous stage in the improvement of intellectual skills that is so necessary in a world of qualitatively heterogeneous and quantitatively overwhelming sources' (Stoica, 1977).
>
> The logical consequences of a library-centred, or even library oriented, educational philosophy have rarely been completely faced or accepted by academic institutions or by many pedagogues. It is relatively easy to get acceptance of a statement such as 'it is a basic tenet that without a library, no college can perform any of its functions' (Libraries in Colleges of Advanced Education, 1971), or that 'The library should be developed as a vital part of the total educational programme of the Institute' (Standards for Libraries in Technical Institutes, 1973).
>
> However, in practice it often proves difficult to establish that an 'essential of satisfactory library service is the close integration of the library with the adminis-

trative and educational policies and practices of the university (Wilson and Tauber 1956). Where such a relationship is established 'the librarian should be in a position to know of all modifications in the curriculum, since they are likely to affect the library' (Wilson and Tauber, 1956).

(Allen, 1979: 4-6).

Much of the relevance of these quotations is summarised in the advice given to Colleges of Advanced Education on the objectives of the college library.

1. The basic aim is to teach students to use the library system — any library system — efficiently.
2. To teach a technique of information searching that can be applied to any subject — the kinds of publications that exist for different information needs.
3. To teach the structure and use of the specialist literature and its relationship to the total information and communication network of a subject.
4. To give students sufficient practice in using the literature so that they can continue to use it as a research tool, to keep up-to-date, or to solve day-to-day problems.

(Report on Advanced Education, 1972).

No doubt discussion with university and college librarians would reveal their support for many of these views on the role of the library in higher education.

The real question for the present study is how does the library fill this role in relation to students at a distance and in particular how does the study centre provide adequate library facilities. The following lengthy quotation from Allen may serve to show how one librarian views the problems and possibilities.

> Attention is being given by librarians to the needs and difficulties of external students. However, compared with the number of such students and the range of courses being offered externally, the human and material resources being devoted to the support of external programmes is minimal. Most activity has been, and is, concentrated upon the bread and butter issue of providing prescribed reading materials. The logistics of communication with distant students severely limits the extent to which the library can offer even basic reference service. A librarian may be able to substitute one reference for that requested when the latter is unavailable, but except where the library staff have acquired considerable direct experience of the particular course, there will inevitably be numerous failures in this situation.
>
> Unless a comparably large collection of books and periodicals is dedicated to the use of external students, there is an unavoidable conflict between the interests of those students on campus and those in distant places. The Open University solved this problem by providing no library service to students at all; the availability of public and academic library facilities across Britain makes such a policy possible, though not necessarily supportable, whereas it would be an untenable attitude in Australia. Some institutions, notably the University of Queensland, have established special library collections for external students that have attained some considerable size. However, it would be generally true that external students do not have anything like the equivalent access to library resources that internal students enjoy.
>
> (Allen, 1979: 11).

Allen then raises the question as to whether in view of the centrality of library resources in higher education, external courses can in fact be educationally equivalent.

> If it is indeed true that 'A qualitative change occurs only when students try to find out for themselves, by perusing the literature . . .' and 'This is the only way to learn how to choose the best solution and how to develop critical skills and creative power' (Stoica, 1977), or even more that when 'confronted by the eternity of knowledge, students acquire the sense of intellectual time and of the necessary continuity' (Stoica, 1977), how are these necessary opportunities to be brought within the practices of external study?
>
> (Allen, 1979: 12).

Allen concludes by pointing to directions for improvement.

> There is a growing movement among Australian librarians for the study of library services in external education. There are also some practical initiatives through co-operation with public library systems, the introduction of computer based catalogues, and the improvement of communications between students and libraries, that hold out some hope. Consideration must also be given to techniques for the extension of reader education programmes to external students through the use of special packages, video tape presentations, or the recruitment of public librarians to take classes or provide demonstrations.
>
> It is perhaps of even greater importance that the designers and administrators of external study programmes recognise the specific needs of students to acquire more than the crude factual content set out in the syllabus. Only by a rethink on the objectives of higher education and their expression in the external mode of study, and through the redesign not only of specific subject units but of entire courses and their educational and administrative framework, will it become possible to invent techniques and experiences that may offer full value to the external student. In such a basic exercise the co-operation of librarians should be sought from the outset.
>
> (Allen, 1979: 12-13)

A recently published survey of library services to external students (Store, 1979) provides a vast amount of statistical data which is too comprehensive and not sufficiently current for the purposes of the present study (the material relating to Deakin is for its first year of operations in distance education, 1978). However it is of interest to note that when respondents to the survey were invited to suggest ways of improving and enriching library services for off campus students they suggested the following:

- Provide annotated catalogues to students.
- Provide reader education in use of indexes.
- Use available technologies.
- Encourage municipal libraries to provide for external students.
- Set up a network of study centres.
- Establish reciprocal borrowing schemes and a network of services.
- Find better delivery systems.
- Give external students telephone access to the library.
- Lend audio visual equipment and encourage its use.
- Produce regular library newsletters.
- Encourage the use of the library during the vacation.
- Produce attractive and useful library guides.

It is of interest to note that one of the suggestions made above is the setting up of study centres. That study centres do not obviate the problem of providing library resources for students in distance education is shown by Chris Fegan-Will, Thatcher Librarian at the University of Queensland. She summarises the main problems of the library in respect of off campus students as:

- Difficulties in harmonising library reference and book selection with the objectives of the external student system and the teaching departments objectives.
- Enormously varied types of library references issued in student study guides underlining the need for annotated catalogues.
- Problems of access and particularly limitations on 'browsing'.
- Providing reader education at a distance when students have little opportunity to use normal tertiary libraries.
- Choice of reading material by external students including ordinary delays and even the question as to whether Ringrose collections are viable.

Against such a background it should be clear that what is provided by way of library resources in study centres is quite inadequate. Perhaps care should be taken to temper that judgment by two observations. The first, that despite shortcomings in library pro-

vision evidence indicates that off campus students perform roughly as well as their on campus counterparts. Secondly, that off campus students themselves do not specify library shortcomings as having a major impact on their studies. Perhaps a more important fact is that, even to approach the ideals implicit in some of the previous discussion, would be an enormously expensive operation. No doubt some improvement can be effected for more modest outlays.

The problems and deficiencies of study centre library facilities should be apparent. In the VTOCN they are simply the problems of the adequacy of the local TAFE College library to which the students belong. In the Riverina (Albury campus) and most Queensland centres they are the problems of 'micro' collections. In the Deakin system they are the problems of suitably augmenting other collections and negotiating appropriate access for students. The interesting point is that the better the library facility at a study centre the more critical are the students who use it. The reason is simple: where there is no or only a minimal collection students have no expectations of a satisfactory library service and make alternative arrangements. However when a collection is sufficient to generate student usage student expectations rise and criticism of shortcomings becomes more trenchant.

There is no doubt that the cost factors in housing a small collection at a study centre are considerable. The cost of space and shelving. The cost of a librarian's time in maintaining the collection and servicing students. The cost of moving books from the main campus to the centre and vice versa. Equally the problem of accessability is a major issue for the study centre. Using a part-time librarian must mean that the library can only be open for a limited period. No doubt this period meets the needs of most students but proves difficult for others. Staffing is again a critical issue with a basic requirement that the librarian be familiar with the institution's courses, facilities and requirements in order to advise students adequately.

However there are advantages accruing if library facilities can be made available locally for students. These are:

(i) access to on-the-spot reader services and help from the librarian.
(ii) more immediate access to wanted material (if it is in the collection).
(iii) avoidance of mailing costs for either or both the institution and the individual.
(iv) ability to browse in other subject areas as well as more broadly in their own subject area.
(v) development of library skills albeit in a limited fashion.
(vi) more effective use of the librarian's time (students do their own reference work instead of writing to ask library staff to do it for them).

The major issue is how best to provide library facilities in the local community remote from the tertiary institution in which off campus students are enrolled. In addition to the possibilities of a study centre having its own collection, such as the Queensland University Ringrose collections, there are a number of possibilities.

- using a local tertiary institution's library, augmenting the collection, negotiating full access for its students, securing adequate training for those students in the use of the library and having one or more librarians on staff who relate specifically to the distant institution, or
- using an existing regional library which can be augmented with staff and stock and to which could be attached the other study centre facilities necessary, or
- combining with other distance education systems together with the city or shire authorities to provide a tertiary education centre which collectively services a sufficient number of students to allow a reasonable library collection with reasonable staffing to be built up, or
- to do the above but in conjunction with a local organisation or institution for example a centre for continuing education, teachers centre, high or technical school or the like.

The conclusion that is reached in this study is that providing adequate library facilities for tertiary off campus students requires a co-operative effort and that no single model for such provision will be a satisfactory solution.

5. How much do study centres cost?

The simple answer is that in those systems included in the present study the question cannot be answered. Even Queensland University which has a purpose built study centre such as the one in Toowoomba servicing only its own off campus students, does not have a clear picture of the cost of that centre. Costs are charged against a number of budgets. They have never, to the writer's knowledge, been brought together so that the university can see clearly what the Toowoomba study centre costs. How much more confused the picture is when more than one institution is involved and when hidden subsidies are provided by individuals who give time and host institutions who contribute to running costs. This is without taking into account 'capital' costs other than those involved in furniture and equipment.

At this stage it is possible to point only to the range of costs that should be identified and on which further data is required.

The following represent the array of potential costs that might be charged against a study centre.

Salaries
- Co-ordinator
- Librarian
- Clerical and Typing
- Tutors

Buildings and Plant
- Rent
- Rates, taxes, insurance
- Light and power
- Cleaning
- Gardens and grounds

Furniture and Equipment
- Supplying of furniture
  - office equipment
  - audio visual equipment
  - library equipment
  - photocopying equipment
  - teletutorial equipment
- Maintenance of equipment

Telephone
- Rental, calls, ansaphone service

Consumables
- Stationery and office supplies
- Refreshments

Mailing
- Mailings to main campus
- Mailings to students
- Mailings to tutors

Travel

Travel and subsistence costs for study centre staff
Travel and subsistence costs for main campus staff when visiting study centres

Library

Cost of relocating stock and cost of additional stock required for study centre.

Not only do the actual costs incurred have to be identified but in developing a cost benefit analysis the cost of any alternative system should be clarified. In addition there is a further problem with cost analysis: all too often potential savings are proposed in one area which represent, not savings, but the transfer of charges from one 'purse' to another. For example the cost of a tutor visiting a country centre can be saved by requiring that the students he would tutor attend a 'school' at the main campus. The cost is transferred from the institution to the student.

6. What are the criteria for determining whether a study centre is successful?

In view of the varied nature of study centres established by institutions it is somewhat difficult to identify specific criteria by which a study centre can be judged successful or otherwise. However several groups of factors appear to be highly relevant.

Firstly, there are factors related to capacity or potential. Does the study centre possess the required accommodation, facilities and staff to serve the purposes for which students use study centres? Is it suitably located and more importantly is it open at those times when off campus students are most able to use it? Even more importantly does it receive the necessary support from its parent institution to allow it to perform effectively? Finally does the study centre, through its staff, have a clear definition of its role and a commitment to creating an effective centre? Clearly these are necessary rather than sufficient factors.

Secondly, there are factors related to actual usage. Do students use a study centre for the major functions that have been identified? How many students or what proportion of potential student users? How frequently and to what extent? If students do not make effective use of the study centre what are the reasons and are those reasons generally known to and understood by those establishing study centres?

Thirdly and closely related, are factors related to attitude. How do students feel about a study centre? Do they see themselves as needing a service which could be but is not being provided at a study centre? Alternatively do they see themselves as not requiring study centre facilities? Are their attitudes towards a study centre and its staff positive or negative?

Fourthly, there are factors related to the objectives of the institution in setting up a study centre. Are those objectives being met?

Finally, there are factors related to cost. Does a study centre provide a service at a reasonable cost?

When these kinds of tests are applied to the study centres established by Queensland and Deakin Universities the results generally would appear to be disappointing. Of the Queensland centres studied only one could be regarded as successful. The Mackay Study Centre has the accommodation, facilities and staff to provide a significant service to students. It is well used by students, with a relatively high proportion of potential users making regular use of its facilities. Attitudes towards the centre are positive on the part of students, tutors and members of the community. The centre appears to be meeting the objectives of the University and is doing so economically.

This is not true of the other Queensland centres, Nambour, Toowomba and Gladstone, and for quite varied reasons. Toowoomba in terms of accomodation and facilities has the potential to be an excellent study centre. Nambour and Gladstone have inadequate facilities. Gladstone lacks access at times when students are most likely to use the centre. All

three have difficulties with staffing. Evidence of student dissatisfaction is quite marked and at Toowoomba and Nambour this dissatisfaction is reinforced by tutors. Indeed at those two centres the officers-in-charge are conscious that the centres are not working effectively. Certainly usage at these three centres is far lower than would be expected. Because of this relatively low level of student usage it is unlikely that the centres can be regarded as cost effective even if cost levels are modest.

A similar judgment that Deakin's study centres are not meeting the objectives of the University and are failing to provide a valued service to students is inescapable, with the exception of the Melbourne centre. Most notable is the extremly limited use of centres by Deakin students. Beyond attendance at a limited number of tutorials and some use of video replay facilities and library materials, little use is made of centres. Costs are not great and are determined chiefly by the number of potential users rather than actual usage. However it is very likely that the per capita fees paid for study centre facilities could be more effectively used. One of the chief disabilities of the Deakin system as seen in this report is the lack of co-ordinators who, as Deakin staff, are responsible to the university for the success of the study centre.

Because of the substantial differences between the general view adopted in this report about what constitutes a study centre and centres in the Riverina and VTOCN systems the same judgment cannot be made of those centres. Riverina centres are designed primarily to service on campus students and off campus student usage is quite limited by design. In the case of the VTOCN centres they are essentially the units of the colleges that administer their off campus studies program. Other criteria need to be used to evaluate the VTOCN system and the secondary campus operation of Riverina at Albury.

7. What is an ideal study centre?

Whilst the discussion under this heading may seem prescriptive it is not intended to be read that way.There are no doubt many ways of organising student access to study facilities. However, it is equally clear that in general, institutions setting up study centres are not as successful as one would expect. The 'ideal' that is presented here should be understood then as one way of dealing with some of the major difficulties and deficiencies observed.

A Co-operative Undertaking. A tertiary study centre for off campus students outside capital cities should be a co-operative undertaking. The opportunities for co-operation are considerable. Firstly, there is co-operation between the institutions each having off campus students enrolled within any given community. In many communities there are students of perhaps a dozen universities and colleges offering off campus studies. When aggregated these students may well represent a sufficient student body to allow a co-operatively organised study centre to provide them with an effective service. Secondly, if there is a tertiary institution within the community a study centre can be set up in co-operation with it. Its accommodation and facilities, particularly its library, will provide a significantly better base on which to establish a study centre than almost any other organisation or institution. If there is not a tertiary institution in the community then consideration should be given to a co-operative venture between, for example, centres for continuing education, regional libraries, teachers centres, regional education offices, technical and high schools. In any community the organisation offering the best base for a study centre should be selected. Clearly the arrangement may differ from one community to another. Thirdly, there should be some co-operative arrangements involving the Shire or City authority. Various forms of support are available from such authorities and a tertiary centre in the community is likely to be more effective if it has the backing of the local authority.

Distinguishable and visible. A tertiary study centre should be a distinguishable and visible entity. Regardless of its location or with which other local organisation it may be associated it will function best if it is visible and identifiable as a study centre. Not that the study centre must necessarily have its own and separate building. In many instances a

separate building is neither desirable nor possible. One or more rooms could be set aside to form a study centre within the host organisation and identified as such. Access should be as direct as possible. Signposting should be clear. A separate telephone with an appropriate entry in the local directory should be available. Even if it is part of a 'host' institution a study centre should be a physical entity. In most institutions it would be possible to make reasonable arrangements to do this if it were accepted as an essential condition for the establishment of a centre.

Staffing. A tertiary study centre should employ staff who are primarily responsible for the operation of the centre and for its success. Again, variety is possible. Firstly, a centre requires a co-ordinator. Ideally the co-ordinator should have a tertiary background, teaching and administrative skills, a counselling orientation and be employed for sufficient hours a week to develop an effective liaison with students and institutions. Secondly, library staff in any effective centre is a necessity. Not that this implies that every centre should have its own library. Library facilities should be either at the study centre or negotiated through the best library available locally. In some instances this will be the library of the local tertiary institution, or the regional library or even a high school library. Wherever the library is located it is essential to provide library staff who 'specialise' in meeting the needs of the students belonging to the study centre. It is not reasonable to expect librarians who have a primary responsibility to their own clientele to invest the time and effort required to service a specialised group of users studying with a variety of institutions. Thirdly, some secretarial support is also required. Many activities involved in running a study centre require time, common sense and practical skills such as typing rather than high level academic or administrative skills.

The ideal study centre will provide staff of these three kinds, full or part-time as appropriate, and in varying 'mixes'. Supplementary staff requirements such as audio visual support can be negotiated locally. Our ideal study centre will also make far more use of tutors than is generally the case at present. Tutors represent a potentially valuable staff resource that should be built into the study centre operation. As well as conducting tutorials, tutors could well be available for counselling and advising students. They may attend the centre not only to conduct tutorials but to supervise the centre for specified periods of time. At present their potential value in many systems is not recognised.

Financial support. The ideal study centre, being a co-operative arrangement, would be supported financially by the institutions involved. A total budget would be drawn up including rental, utilities, telephone and office expenses. Part of the overheads would be staff such as the co-ordinator, librarian or office secretary who would service all students. Tutors might provide some services as part of those overheads and some services particularly related to their own students: the latter could be directly paid for by the institution for which they were tutoring. The development of some equitable arrangement by which institutions contribute to the running expenses of such a centre should not be difficult. A lack of proper funding arrangements at the present time dictates whether some functions are carried out or not.

There is however a further potential source of income. On campus students pay a general service fee which is used largely to support student organisations such as the S.R.C., sports association and union. Off campus students in some cases pay similar fees, perhaps at a reduced level and in other instances pay no fees. They make little or no use of facilities provided by the organisations mentioned above. There is some merit in off campus students paying, as a substitute for the general service fee which supports main campus activities, a 'study centre' service fee which is used to enhance the local facilities. It need not be a large fee: part of it may be remitted to the main campus in recognition of membership in the various student bodies but the bulk of it could be used to support the provision of study centre facilities. As well as providing a supplementary source of funding students would be more likely to use services in a centre which they are supporting financially.

Minimum accommodation. The study centre would need a specified minimum accommodation. A general office, library where necessary, one or two tutorial rooms, and a co-ordinator's office. In most study centres developed on a co-operative basis by several institutions one or two tutorial rooms would not be sufficient to meet the demand at peak hours. Rather than attempt to provide for such peak hour usage within the study centre the use of additional rooms could be negotiated. Clearly all that has been said previously about furniture, furnishings and equipment would apply. The extent of facilities ecessary in the study centre would depend very much on the access to existing facilities negotiated by the study centre for its students.

Local functions. The study centre, should organise with the support of the respective institutions and the city or shire authority those public occasions that may mark the work of the centre and its students. For example, a combined degree and diploma awarding ceremony might be organised in the city hall and presided over by one or more of the Chancellors, Vice Chancellors or College Directors. Commencement functions would be a possibility and student functions such as a dance or ball would not be out of the question.

Whilst a great deal more could be said about a study centre this probably suffices to demonstrate the main thrust of the argument. The essential ingredients are institutional co-operation, a physically identifiable centre, proper staffing, joint funding and community involvement.

Where institutions are currently providing a reasonable service to local students the cost of supporting such a study centre would be only marginally greater than their existing costs. Institutions not providing such service would have to make provision for the financial support necessary.

8. Finally, what of more extensive networks of study centres?

In a sense that question has already been answered. Every study centre outside the capital cities should be a co-operative venture between all the tertiary institutions servicing students in the local area. If institutions agreed to participate in such arrangements little more would be required. Clearly in some cases, one institution may be a major user (and major provider) and could therefore accept responsibility for taking the necessary initiatives.

Perhaps in each state one institution might accept a co-ordinating role with respect of study centre operations. It is more likely however that attempts to regulate or co-ordinate by any one institution being given such a role would be met by hostility and suspicion. More appropriate would be the encouraging of institutions which are developing such centres and which are amenable to co-operation to develop patterns of co-operation appropriate to local circumstances.

Whether some tangible form of assistance should be given by government is a matter for debate. It would be suggested in this paper that the most appropriate way of doing this would be some direct contribution towards the capital costs of supplying study centre accommodation in local communities whether this be obtained by alienating accommodation in an existing institution, augmenting the accommodation available in another organisation or institution or creating a purpose built centre.

Networks of study centres, to be successful, ought to be a natural outgrowth of co-operation between institutions in an attempt to meet the varied needs of students at a distance more effectively.

CONCLUSION

It is necessary to reiterate the point that the argument advanced in this report is *not* that all distance students require a local study centre nor indeed that providing such centres is the most effective way of supporting students at a distance. The review of support systems clearly indicated that there are alternative forms of support service. Study centres are only one option.

The conclusion reached in this report is that, on the whole, study centres where they do exist are not functioning as effectively as they should be. A number of factors contribute to this situation. In some instances the deficiency is one of understanding what centres can and cannot do effectively. In other cases it is a failure to provide the resources that will allow the centre to function well. Suggestions are offered about a number of factors — co-operation, funding, staffing, community involvement and the nature of the facilities to be provided — that would remedy these defects. Overall however the major emphasis must be seen as the focus on staffing. The quality of the staff employed in the local area determines the success, or otherwise of the local centre. It is further noted that institutions do not fully use the staffing resources available.

There is a role for study centres and providing institutions co-operate there can be a sufficient aggregation of users to make study centres cost effective. These co-operative arrangements need to be developed sensitively and gradually. Network arrangements could be an *outcome* of such co-operative ventures but are unlikely to be effective if imposed upon institutions.

Finally, it should be noted that this report is not the end of the study. In both Queensland and Deakin Universities further exploration of study centres and the students they serve is planned. Queensland University is examining the possibilities of more formalised co-operative arrangements between itself and other tertiary institutions in order to provide effective study centres. Deakin is planning to investigate more fully the needs of particular communities and how these could best be met by local study centres. If this report contributes to these and other initiatives in relation to student services in general and study centres in particular it will have served a modest but useful purpose.

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